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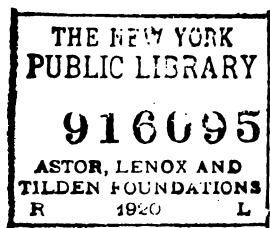
SIDNEY McCALL

Author of "Truth Dexter," "The Breath of the Gods," etc.



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TO
LAURANCE HARVEY McNEILL,
THE DEAR BROTHER WHO, IN CHILDHOOD,
ROAMED THE SOUTHERN WOODS
WITH ME

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CHRISTOPHER LAIRD



CHRISTOPHER LAIRD

CHAPTER I

PAINTER'S BALD

LITTLE Dunrobin lay on the east bank of the Rydal; a grey town in winter, a fresh vivid green one in spring because of its dense growth of shade trees.

At three sides of it spread chequered patches of farm-lands, and long, wavering roads of red clay extended the short city streets until each one was lost in a forest that climbed and surmounted a horseshoe of low, rolling hills. As a lone pearl belongs to its concave, so Dunrobin belonged to its valley.

Across the clear stream, to the west, there was scant room for farming. The foothills came close to the water, and, rising at once, ran back lifting blue crest to one thinner and bluer, until they had gained the remoteness—and title—of mountains.

On the slope of the dominant peak, "Painter's Bald," so called from the nickname the settlers had given the prevalent panthers, stood a log-cabin built

by a Scotsman, Abednego Laird. Rude board wings had been added to shelter Abednego's growing family, with a front porch and back, and various outbuildings for "critters" later on. And Lairds lived there still.

In this generation of Lairds, the family was typical. The father, "old man Laird," as at forty he began to be called, worked only when he could not avoid it. The profits derived from his corn, pigs and sheep were spent, not on his home, but down "to Bat's Cave," where Jed Crozier was running a "moonshine."

Laird's wife, a feeble, protesting victim of chronic "neuralgy," long since had lost interest in all but her snuff-stick, and the constant complaints of her ailments. The household affairs shifted, little by little, to the shoulders of Ossie, her eldest born. The second girl, Leezer, chanced by one of those freaks of old families to be born an exquisite beauty.

To the dull and dreary home, Leezer grew to be like the flower in a vase that lights up a desolate chamber, a touch of blue ribbon, relieving the drabness of homespun, a rift in grey clouds or mist. By a tacit agreement, never hinted in words, the overworked Ossie connived with her mother, that the younger sister should be spared most of the cooking and scouring. Leezer swept sometimes, and sang, and did much of the sewing, but her slim hands were smooth as a young tulip-poplar leaf.

There was a third child, a boy named Christopher, a heavy and amiable being, with a large head that seemed to be thatched with dry cornshucks, and round innocent orbs the colour of blue mountain skies.

Mr. Laird was not proud of his son. "Hain't got as much sense in his hull corn-fed body as Ossie has got in one toe."

At this statement, the reclining Mrs. Laird lifted up the old stocking now bound around a particularly trying attack of neuralgy.

"How come you spen' ha'sh words like them on yo' son, Amos Laird?" she demanded. "He's as kine-hearted a chile as ever dug sassafras-root fer his po' suff'rin' Maw's tea, an' I loves him. Mebbe he hain't got the peartness of Ossie, or the bubblin' sunshine of Leezer. And hit mebbe, likewise," she went on with deeper intention, her one keen, grey, uncovered eye impaling her husband, "that he hain't got all the sense his Paw mought hev had, ef'n the devil in Bat's Cave hadn't grabbed him. But Chris is willin' an' good as a angel, an' I spit ye outen my mouth, Amos Laird," she continued on a shrill note of pain, "fer shamin' yo' own flesh an' blood as ye's doin'."

Ossie was just seventeen when the degenerate "Paw" came reeling and stumbling home late one night through the dark dripping bushes, his jeans shirt as wet and as dripping.

There had been, at Bat's Cave, some sort of a

"rookus." "Shoots" had spat out from the laurels, and Laird was now bringing home, along with his last drunken frolic, a bullet which was to end his profitless life.

The month was November. All day long ghostly clouds of white mist had boiled up from the valleys, had wound among the tree-stems and clung to the interlaced branches. As the dying man lay on his rope-bed and harsh creaking mattress of straw, the hickories and oaks, meeting over the cabin in the darkness where the chill night congealed moisture drop by drop on the broad shaking leaves, sent down a soft, mocking patter.

"Ossie—gal,—lean closter,—closter yit,—so's you kin make out to hear what I'm sayin'," gasped the sick man, and groaned with the effort.

"Now, Paw," urged the frightened girl gently, "hit's plumb foolish fer you to spen' words while you's hurtin'. Jes' bide thar in yo' bed, untwell Chris kin git back with the doctor. Chris is ridin' now—*hard*. He went bar'back on Esau, an' taken the short trail by the mill. He'll git back here to we-uns fo' we know hit. Jes' you try to bide quiet-like, Paw."

"I'm passin' out now, Ossie gal," said the dying man solemnly. "When Chris an' ole Esau gits back, I'll be fittid."

Amos's wife, crouching near, thrust the end of the bright patchwork quilt in her mouth, partially

stifling a wail, while the shivering Leezer, beside her, broke into terrified tears.

"Shoo them two snivellin' females outen here," commanded the invalid fretfully. "I cain't talk with a couple o' squinch-owls a-screechin'. You're the onliest one in the hull dad-burned outfit wuth talkin' to nohow."

When Ossie re-entered the room, the fast-glazing eyes on the bed fixed upon her own with desperate intentness.

"Hit'll all be on you, my po' gal," Laird said with the hint of a sob in his throat. "You'll hev to take charge of the hull kit an' bilin'. The ole place is run down,—thanks to Crozier,—an' you won't find the care of hit easy. But you allays is had all the spunk of a wild mountain-cat an' the sense of our ole plough-horse, Esau. You kin do hit if enny one kin. Try to keep the ole home together as long, ennyhow, as yo' Maw keeps on livin'; an' I charge you to do yo' plumb best by yo' pritty young sister an' Chris."

"Po' Chris—my po' no-count Chris," he repeated, letting his tired voice pause on the name. "He won't be enny great punkins to help ye, but he'll lay on his belly out thar in the sun, watchin' flowers an' bugs, whilst the sheep grazes near him. He'll feed the hawgs too,—an' all critters. He's a kine-hearted chile, ez his Maw says. Yas,—Chris he'll be layin' out thar on the hill-side.

"Ossie,—Ossie!" the man screamed with his first awful touch of death's coldness, "I cain't leave the sun an' the uplands. They is waitin' fer me out thar yit,—they smells good in my nost'ls, —I want to see sunlight onct more.

"But thar,—thar," he sobbed, sinking again to his pillow. "Ain't no uset ter honin'. Don't you cry so pitiful, darter. I done brought this black death on myse'f,—damn that hell-brewin' scoun'el Jed Crozier. Now I'm goin' to sleep. I'm took powerful with longin' to sleep, all of a suddint; an' I ain't aimin' to wake up no mo'. Good-bye, darter,—you bin better to me an' yo' po' washed-out Maw than either one of we-uns deserves. You tell Chris,—ez my las' charge to him——" A spasm of agony caught the words from his lips, and the grey face grew even more ghastly.

"Paw,—*Paw!*" pleaded the girl, leaning over and clutching both shoulders. "Don't sleep yit. You mus' finish speakin'. You said to tell Chris——"

"Yes, I rekerlit now," moaned the father. "You tell Chris to keep fur away fum that still,—hit's black death an' disgrace what's brewed thar."

"I'll pass them words; an', O Paw,—O Paw,—my ole Pappy,—don't you leave me so soon! Don't go leave me alone in this dwellin'—I am only seventeen. O Paw, open yo' eyes,—smile todes me. It's Ossie."

But Paw was already adventuring along a new trail that leads over the one great divide.

Ossie Laird was just twenty-four years old and looked forty, when one cloudy morning—a day when the sky seemed a floor of impalpable greyness through which light was diffused with no hint of the actual sun—a young hunter from down in the valley found his way to the log-cabin door. Ossie was finishing her sweeping. She heard the quick, unusual footsteps and, turning, ran forward. Her head was bound up in an old scrap of red calico, to keep out the dust, and her grey gingham sleeves were rolled high over elbows that looked like the jointing of twigs.

"I'm James Gaither from Dunrobin," said the stranger, removing his cap. "I was hunting up here with some comrades, and got lost. Can you direct me to the best and shortest road to the city?"

Ossie looked into pleasant brown eyes. She saw a white brow, almost as fair and smooth as Leezer's, a long delicate nose, and lips rather thin, parting now over frail blue-white teeth.

The girl's heart began to beat wildly. She had never seen such a being before,—except in pictures.

"Hit's a powerful long trail back to the low-kentry," she stammered at last. Then the quick genuine hospitality of all mountain homes came to her rescue. "You step right in here. Was you lost all night long?"

"All night long. I slept on the hillside. I must apologize," he smiled, "for my untidy appearance."

"Lands' sake! Then you ain't had a mite o' breakfast?"

Gaither's rueful expression was sufficient reply.

"You keep on right back thar to my kitchen," Ossie commanded. "I'll cook you a small mess o' vittles in two shakes."

"But really," the young man protested, moving hopefully the while to where she pointed. "I cannot allow you to take so much trouble."

"Ain't no buts in these parts," threw back Ossie almost gaily, "when a he-critter needs to be fed."

They moved through the main room, and just at the end stepped down, by one short slanting tread, to the kitchen.

Gaither saw no stove and no preparations for cooking, except that in the wide stone-set fireplace hung a crane. Pots and pans stood along the mantelshelf, and depended by nails from each side of the grate. Overhead, there were festoons of herbs, beans in clustering pods, and vivid chaplets of peppers. Hams and bacon were swung side by side with bundles of drying tobacco and small sheaves of bright yellow corn.

At first the place had seemed empty. Then he heard the rustle of cloth from an alcove, and a girlish voice cried,—a voice perfect, and thrush-

like in clearness: "Who you totin' in, Sister? Hit can't be brother Chris at this time o' day."

"No, hit ain't Chris. Hit's a furriner,"—a shy side-look flung around, as she spoke, toward the stranger. "He 'lows ez he lost his trail back to the city, an' I'm aimin' to cook him some vittles. You lay down that sewin' o' yourn, an' come set his place at the table."

Leezer flung the work down. At one spring she was out into the open, her blue, curious eyes on their guest.

James Gaither had turned the same pleasant, casual smile he was still conserving for Ossie,—when he and the younger girl came face to face.

The man's smile died. A quick look of wonder distended his pupils; he caught in one long breath, and held it.

"That thar's Leezer," remarked Ossie in a matter-of-fact tone, as she reached for a skillet. "She's the one ornamint that we has here. Me an' Chris we does all the work."

"Of course you do," thought James Gaither, in the heat of instinctive mental protest. "A Hebe like that to be made to feed pigs or fry bacon! She's the prettiest thing in the world."

James stayed, not only to breakfast, but so far into the mild afternoon, that Ossie and Chris had to tell him "hit war time to hitch up and make tracks" if he wanted to reach his own home before midnight.

Chris insisted upon driving him as far as the first mountain settlement, where a horse and conveyance might be hired. When Gaither started down the long slope to the valley he took Leezer's girlish heart with him, but left all of his own in exchange.

A few days after his mountain adventure, the small Virginia community became greatly excited to hear that James Gaither had bought him a horse. Dunrobin could put two and two together, as well as the next, especially when one of the two was a horse. Such an extravagance, coupled with the hunter's having been lost a whole day on the heights told the story; for the Gaithers, in common with many of the old families, had been impoverished by the Civil War.

James had christened his spirited chestnut by the queer name of "Sister," and in a very few weeks the mare could have gone, in the dark, up a certain long winding road, and paused, nicker-ing hopefully for refreshment, at a certain old tumbledown stable on high Painter's Bald.

In October of the same year, on a day when the mountains were splendid in scarlet, and gold, and warm sunshine, James Gaither and a few chosen friends, men and women, took the long trail together, and brought Leezer down to the lowlands as his bride.

CHAPTER II

THE TRANSPLANTING

WHEN Leezer had gone, leaving silence where she had made laughter, and leaving patient weather-worn faces where her girlish fairness had bloomed, the proud but disconsolate mother calmly took to her bed, and told Ossie she "warn't goin' to study 'bout leavin' it,—never agin."

Chris moped around the pastures, avoiding the dull home as much as he possibly could. He had dearly loved Leezer, and her marriage to a "fur-riner" was a grief it took long to console.

As for Ossie, a sort of fierce energy clutched her. The old farm was worked as never before, and success rewarded each one of her efforts. She actually spent some of her money upon better clothing for the family, and ordered books too, humble spellers and readers, and an elementary arithmetic, along with more adult volumes.

Thereafter, in common with methods of "blab schools," the kind known in the hills, where each pupil studies aloud at the top of a shrill, high-pitched voice, "Sis" could be heard "a-gittin' book-larnin'" for a mile up the slopes.

The mother grew used to the sound, and when she asked Ossie to soothe her by giving "some o' that pritty book-readin'" the girl would comply with a thin smile of triumph.

"Ef only yo' po' Paw could see you a'settin' thar straight as a stick, an' er-dronin' along, same ez ole Pason Wiggs fum his Bible," the widow once sighed.

Chris, on the contrary, hated the sound of it, and to pin the tall active boy to five minutes of attention proved a difficult task.

"But you *mus'* lissen, Chris," said his sister with vehemence. "You hev got ter larn readin' an' writin' an' figgers the same as me, an' it should be even better,—you bein' a man.

"I tell you, hit's somethin' ez can't be put off. Mebbe we-uns too, Chris," she added, looking straight into his face, "mout go down to the broader lands soon."

Chris, seated on the sill of the door leading down into the yard, dug into the sand with his toe. His face had not reflected her eagerness.

"We cain't git erway fum the mountings," he said slowly. "Thar's Maw. Ye cain't travel Maw down."

"Yes, thar's Maw, sure 'nuf," answered Ossie, and something determined and hard in her voice made Chris wince. "I warn't thinkin' of movin' Maw outen,—I warn't thinkin' o' goin' jes' yit."

In the bleak of that winter Mrs. Laird's lifelong

idol and tyrant, the neuralgy, plus a few other "ailments," whose name as spoken gravely by old Doc Clearwater the victim did not take the trouble to learn,—brought her futile career to an end.

Chris wept at the grave placed "erlongside o' Paw," and would steal to it often, laying on the bare mound sprigs of holly, or long pendant clusters of bright mountain ash, in lieu of more delicate flowers; but Ossie had no time for such visits.

She was building and weaving the future, as a tailor-bird weaves its stout nest. The old farm had been put up for rent or sale, though she tried to keep that fact from Chris. All the livestock went down, trip by trip, in the form of pork, wool, mutton, or bacon, and Sol Thigpen's huge wagon "schooner" brought back in return dingy rolls of worn "greenbacks," or thick silver dollars, which Ossie secreted in the whorls of her father's great curved hunting-horn.

It was early in March when events reached a climax. The two Lairds, after eating their supper, were drawn up to the bright kitchen hearth.

"Chris," began Ossie slowly, "ef you-uns has any old duds that you aims to carry down, hit's time ye war thinkin' o' packin'." Before speaking the next words she paused, and leaned forward to stir up a smouldering log. "Sol Thigpen's to drive us down into the city in two days fum now."

Chris swallowed a thick painful lump. It had come, and he felt himself helpless.

"I don't want'er go, an' ye knows hit," he said in a very small voice. "Hit's a-jerkin' my heart by the roots fer to leave here."

As Ossie kept silent, the boy turned around in the old hickory chair that had been Paw's, and looked into her fire-lit face, with round humble eyes, that had a disturbing resemblance to those of a sheep about to be slaughtered.

"We hev'n't no call, as I kin make out," he went on, vaguely heartened by his sister's thoughtful expression, "tryin' ter mix up with them fine folk way down in the valley. We ain't o' their breed, an' don't b'long ermongst 'em. We don't fit,—leastways," he corrected hastily, warned by a twitch of thin shoulders, "I don't fit."

"You kin fit anywhar that ye minds to," said Ossie. "Yo' trouble is that ye don't mind. Oh!" she cried in a sudden accession of anger, "why ain't ye got backbone, or any ambition like me? It's a funny world nohow," she went on, her voice shrill and vibrant with feeling. "Hit's a plumb crazy world, to bring ye here a man-chile, an' me jes' a shrivelled old maid. Ef I could be *you*, an' you be the 'ooman——"

"An' by thundah I'm willin' to be," roared out Chris in his anguish. "Ef you'd leave me in peace on the mountings I'd be a sow, or a hen-hawk, or a tabby,—ef'n only ye'd jes' leave me be!" and then, startled to realize that he had

actually "hollered" at Sis, sank far down in his chair.

A tense silence came over them. Once Chris looked around furtively, to note whether or not Ossie had reached for a broomstick.

The fire burned low. Filmy squares of blue ashes lay like ghosts of grey bark on the length of a glowing red log. Chris's long legs, tipped by huge slippered feet that made two big gaps in the firelight, moved them outward a little, to reach for the warmth of the coals.

His thick body, topped by a head that habitually drooped forward a trifle, was huddled together in a mass so forlorn, that Sis's heart softened.

Bud's lip quivered. His round eyes grew humid with tears. "Ef hit warn't fer my critters," he said, now imploringly, "I could make out to stan' hit all else. Thar's that tame fox o' mine,—the ole white bitch I keers fer. She's jes' had a litter, an' I'm powerful eager in feedin' 'em. An' the spring fun all over the mountings is jes' startin' up. Thar'll be layin-by time befo' we knows hit,—an' a hull day o' singin' an' prayin' over yan to the glen,—an' round thar on the far side o' Painter's Mr. Thigpen is stretchin' a whole hundred hides all to onct. He let me an' 'Lonzo hep him summat. Hit was bully. The hides they smell till they seem to turn ye right into a buzzard,—but 'Lonzo an' me don't min' that. An'——"

Ossie gave a quick gesture that checked him, yet her smile was indulgent. "Ye'll fergit all them po' mounting frolics when ye onct is made friends to the city."

"I won't never make friends," wailed the boy. "That air jes' what I'm sayin'. Do a kildee make friends with a beaver?"

"Leezer has," answered Ossie. "She's writ me. She don't hanker no mo' fer the mountings. You'll fergit 'em, the same ez she's done. Ye jes' watch."

Chris shook his great, tumbled, fair head. He knew he should never forget them.

In Dunrobin, Miss Ossie had pre-engaged rooms in the most select of lodging-houses. It was that of Miss Abby Quigley, a two-storey structure of wood, with a cramped gabled attic and shaded verandahs that ran on three sides of the first floor. It was almost directly across the street from the brick home of the Gaithers.

The blissful young husband and Leezer had insisted on having the brother and sister come to them as a matter of course. Indeed, when refusal persisted, Leezer dissolved into tears, the first since her marriage.

But Ossie knew her own mind: that was certain. There was still much "book-larnin'" before her. She knew she required exactly the sort of seclusion and privacy that her small, paid-for chamber afforded.

Chris had been put into one of the queer attic rooms, the shape of a logarithm, and about as inspiring. Soon after their arrival, Sis had attempted to "goard" Chris into going to school, but against this the boy had held out with a desperate tenacity.

"You hadn't ought to ast me to do nairy sech a fool-thing," he protested. "I'd look a plumb idjit settin' thar on a long wooden bench with them children jes' reachin' my elbow. I'll study them pesky schoolbooks alone in my room withouten folks lookin' in; but I don't aim to study out loud."

"Then you must study hard, Chris," said Ossie, perceiving herself to be defeated. "An' you must try all the time to stop usin' them,—those white-trash words like 'withouten' an' 'idjit' an' 'plumb.'"

"I'll remember to try," promised Chris, but his tone lacked enthusiasm.

Among the first personal friends that Ossie made after reaching Dunrobin was the little librarian, Miss Sally Finger. The "liberry," as that temple of culture was usually called, occupied two long dusty rooms over the Dry Goods Emporium of James Weldon & Co. This important business, in spite of its high-sounding title, was run only by the two people concerned—James, a thin-necked, alert little Englishman, who looked like a shrimp partly boiled and then jerked from the water, and

his sister, the coy Miss Theresa, who was a twin shrimp in skirts.

For Miss Laird's bright spots of life, and her genuine relaxation, there were daily excursions across the red-clay street, to the Gaither abode, and hours of playing with Mildred. Ossie's heart had flowered out at the first sight of her dainty small niece. She was Gaither,—from her delicate head to her wee, rosy toes,—every inch was pure Gaither, as Leezer so often declared. Indeed there existed no trace of rude mountain vigour,—for the child was small-boned, faintly coloured, and scarcely missing that state called fragile.

Chris hovered about the child's cradle, or would sit on the floor by her side,—but could never be coaxed into lifting the exquisite thing in his arms.

"It 'ud be like me holdin' a butterfly," he said, smiling. "I'm afeared that the little girl's dust 'ud come off on my fingers."

CHAPTER III

CHRIS SEES HALLONQUIST HALL

IT was a bright Sabbath morning in May, and Chris Laird had made his escape after breakfast, to avoid the unbearable union of Ossie and two hours at church. On strong legs that for years had been trained to bear him up high craggy slopes, he now set out to cover the long tepid stretches of Dunrobin's turnpikes. Within the town limits, on a wide tree-shaded road, stood Hallonquist Hall, the impressive "fo' de war" show-place of Dunrobin.

There were four great white oaks at the corners, like four poles set about a new hayrick, when the saplings insist upon growing. Later on, Chris was told that the wife of the original Hallonquist, the daughter of an English divine, had at the time of their planting named the oaks from the four apostles, St. Matthew, St. Mark, St. Luke and St. John.

From the gate a broad pebbled driveway lay flat between hedges of lilacs, until, having reached the first terrace, it divided in twain, and running out to the right and the left was lost in a tangle of shrubbery.

Chris's eager gaze ran past the steps and the level loggia to the four mammoth white columns which held up, at an incredible altitude, a triangular pediment, heavily trimmed with dentals of wood, and the iron-railed balcony, jutting out from the second floor windows.

The beauty of dark slave-wrought iron, in contrast to the dazzling façade, made a lasting impression upon the ignorant boy who beheld it.

What worlds of difference divided his own humble life from the people who dwelt in so magnificent a home! thought the wistful observer. How beyond all possible dreams it would be that ever he harboured a friend there!

Chris's freedom for strolls such as this, and excursions to size up the town to which fate, in the person of Ossie, had dragged him, did not last very long. When Sis became certain that no coaxing or threats would force her young brother to school, she conferred with James Gaither on the subject of getting the boy some sort of a start in an office.

This position was secured in the real-estate firm of Page & Youngblood, and Chris, from being a sweeper of floors and an ignominious washer-out of the ubiquitous cuspidor, gradually rose to be an accredited rent collector, his field of operations confined for the most part to the cabins of improvident negroes.

Chris honestly did his best to keep his full com-

pact with Sis, to read, to study and "figger" each evening; but his small room proved bitterly cold during the winter, and correspondingly hot later on.

He would start upon his studies briskly enough, when some word, such perhaps as "orchard," or "hilltop" or "shepherd," wrenched his thoughts quite away, and lifting hot eyes he would stare through his one dormer window, and again would lie down in green pastures that grew so far away, or lead his sick heart by "still waters."

The boarders all tried to be kind, each in his or in her special way, but the boy's shyness clung, and obscured him as a grey mist on old Painter's Bald.

An all-knowing drummer, who "blew in" for a few days every fortnight, moved by what he considered the frankest and kindest of motives, drew Chris to one side. "You ain't come to life yet, my young buck!" the travelling man said, laughing. "I've caught on to the trouble with you!"

This worldly assertion came forth with a nudge and a wink that somehow turned Chris hot and angry.

"You can manage to have just as much fun in a little old one-horse Southern town like Dunrobin, as you can in Noo Yawk. But of course," the drummer went on, his face full of evil suggestion, "a feller must know where to look. Now, you take me for instance,—there's a covey of girls,—queens,

all of 'em, that I run down to old Farmer——”

“Shet yo' damn mouth!” roared Chris at this juncture. “What you think that I be—a sick dawg to be flung rotten vittles? Ef you spen' one mo' word of that filth in my hearin', I'll jes' nachally ram all yo' teeth down yo' tho'te an' shake ye ontwell they be swallowed. Hit's true that I'm jes' down fum the mountings, but the air I bin breathin' is clean.”

It was Miss Quigley herself who, by accident, first opened a path of deliverance. At the rear of her house stretched a small vegetable garden. Her hired man, old Ab'm, had just been laid low with the misery in some of his rusty joints.

Continuing a method that probably held in the days when the ladies of Tyre and of Sidon were driven to take in “paying guests,” Miss Quigley was describing minutely to the dinner table all of the tragedy old Ab'm's illness at this critical time might entail.

“The hotbed of lettuce is *lovely*,” she sighed. “The carrot and beet tops are just showing. The cauliflowers must be kept in their straw, or these frosts will blacken them. The cabbage and collards——”

“Collards!” came from Chris Laird like a shot from a gun.

“Yes, Christopher,” replied Miss Abby kindly. “I always keep a row for the kitchen. The servants are fond of them. Of course,” she put in

with a slight lifting of shoulders, "I don't serve collard-greens here."

"I'd be powerful pleased to work them craps for you, Miss Abby," said Chris, forgetting in his eagerness to use city speech. "I'm a mighty good hand at a hoe, as Sis can tell you."

Sis's face was a thin crimson wedge of embarrassment.

"It is true," Ossie declared in her most stilted manner. "My brother is interested in agr-ag-giculture. It is good for his health. I am sure he will be happy to offer his services."

After this, the small garden patch, once so intermittently tended, became Chris's special concern. He would rise with the sun to dig cutworms, which at that hour were supposed to lie quite near the surface, and, exhuming a culprit, stretched him out on the rail of an old boarded fence which divided Miss Quigley's lot from the Rectory.

Later on in the summer, Chris joyed in the restless brown moths beating down to the deep golden hearts of the squash-blooms, and in ghosts of small butterflies flitting along with the bees and playing aerial seesaw on the pink, silken tassels of corn.

There were spiders, too, in the garden, in that blessed oasis of dulness. Chris had always possessed a queer liking for these patient, intelligent insects.

Along with the varieties known to his mountain,

Chris had the joy of discovering more than one unknown species.

Oné day on the rotting old board fence he encountered a large sluggish creature whose back appeared to be covered with sand. Leaning closer, he saw that the grains were a mass of young spiders, very quiet, and huddled together as if for their lives.

As the movable nursery perceived him, it slid through a crack in the fence. This was too much for Chris. He must see where the strange mother "bided."

Forgetting all of the property rights of a city, he climbed to the top of the fence and, catching sight of his prey as it dove into a hole in the earth, sprang over beside it.

He was stooping far down, intent on a tunnel that appeared to be lined with brown leather, when he heard just behind him a voice,—a girl's voice,—and the speaker was laughing.

CHAPTER IV

MARY BARING

CHRIS stood up at a bound. He longed passionately to follow his spider but instead he seemed to be growing until, from a horrible height, he looked down on a slender girl clothed in delicate blue muslin, down into an up-raised face, which had eyes exactly the colour of the wild morning-glories now clambering up through his corn.

Before he could speak, the girl flushed and lowered her gaze. "Oh, I *do* beg your pardon. I thought you,—I thought you were younger and—and—smaller. You are young Mr. Laird, are you not,—the brother of sweet Mrs. Gaither?"

"Yes, I'm Leezer's brother," stammered the wretched, delighted Chris. "I'm asking your pardon,—Miss—Miss——"

"Mary Baring, and I live here at the Rectory with Auntie,—and I'm just home from a visit to Richmond," imparted the vision.

Chris nodded, but ploughed on with the words, "I'm asking your pardon for vaulting your fence like I done,—but I'm after a spider——"

"A what!" echoed the girl. "That's all right

about the vaulting. I'm glad that you did. Where's the spider?"

"Right down there," pointed Chris. "But ain't you skeered of him? Leezer is,—even Sis,—and Sis ain't skeered of much, nuther."

"I don't really know whether I'm frightened or not," said the exquisite voice, full of laughter. "I was never close enough to find out. Let me try this minute."

"There he is,—there he is,—in his do'way," cried Chris in intensest excitement. Both young things squatted down, side by side, their eyes focussed. "Now, ain't she the beatenest critter?" the boy continued.

"Oh, I see her,—I see him!" cried Mary in equal excitement. "It's there in its little round burrow, all lined with brown velvet,—so pretty! Now he's gone. Oh, Mr. Laird do please make it come back."

"She's a lady," said Chris simply. "You can't make her nohow. She was strolling round airing her fambly. It's all glued to her back."

"What?" asked the girl, slightly disconcerted. Then, turning again to the object of interest, exclaimed: "There,—she's come back to the daylight. She's staring right up in our faces. Gracious! How many eyes has she got?"

"Eight," replied Chris, with such pride that a hearer might infer he had made them. "Eight,

each as keen and as bright as a pin-pint. And she needs 'em," he added, with a low happy laugh. "If she's going to look round and keep count of her children."

"Why, it's *thrilling*," said Mary Baring, taking in a long, satisfied breath. "Who would ever have thought that a spider could be so interesting?"

"And you ain't skeered a mite?" queried Chris, as the two rose to their feet. He could not turn his eyes from her face. The long stare became so embarrassing that Mary flushed, and twitched rather petulantly aside, as she answered, "No, I ain't scared a mite, and I'm glad, for I don't like girls that are scary."

"Nor does I. You's the kind of a girl that I likes, Miss,—Miss——"

"Mary Baring," she told him again. "And now that we've met, Mr. Laird," she went on, self-possession having returned, "you must come to the Rectory and call on Auntie and me. We both love Mrs. Gaither,—and we'd *love* you to be friends with us too."

That night Chris began his first diary, a practice that ran with the course of his life and was destined to be of deep comfort to him.

His first volume began humbly enough, with the unused pages of a copy-book purchased by Ossie, and which he was expected to fill with neat, slanting reiterant phrases, such as "Ambition is the

last infirmity of noble minds," "Brave souls need braver deeds to test them" and "Cæsar's wife must be above suspicion."

Chris had reached the letter G, and five times had traced in a round inhuman chirography the unanswerable statement that "Greater is he that ruleth his spirit, than he that taketh a city." A long heavy line was now drawn, and after dating, Chris began:

"I have met up with a gal, no it's girl, that ain't skeered of spiders. She is nicer to look at than any. Her eyes and her dress is both blue, and her cheeks is shining and pink like our sunrise. When she laffs, it sounds jest like that little river by Lonzo's Paw's tannery. But it don't smell like that much. She axed me to call jest like fine city folks. She didn't mean holler, by calling,—but to step up to her door and pull a bell, and a black woman comes quick and opens it. I don't think I will go, but I'm glad that she axed me."

The formal visit Mary suggested was, indeed, for the present, a thing quite too bold to attempt. But Chris moved the old hickory chair, the one "dud" he had brought from his lost mountain home, to that end of Miss Quigley's verandah that gave on to the Rectory grounds, and each day with a pencil of gold he marked off the strokes; a good day or bad, being dependent upon the number of times he had caught sight of Mary Baring's flutter-

ing ribbons, or, much better, had been given a bright nod or a smile.

Had Chris been introspective, he might have sought reasons for the strange, sweet content that now filled him. The nightly struggles with his schoolbooks no longer appeared as a task to be dreaded or shunned.

"Miss Mary," as by now he called Mary Baring, spoke a language that ladies should speak, and Chris felt that the lessening of difference between his backwoods dialect and the girl's crystal phrasing might lessen other differences too.

The work at his office seemed lighter. His constant suggestions "to step out an' heckle that old possum Tom Jackson, what's got rent money hid in his pouch," or "to stroll round by old Granny Davis, and dig up another fo' bits," surprised and delighted Chris's employers.

How could those elderly persons imagine, as they sat in their small and dusty office, with feet on table and desk, that their youthful collector was even then roaming the streets for a glimpse of two eyes like blue flowers?

A dreadful awakening came to the boy one bright morning at breakfast.

Miss Quigley, after drawing a pleased and provocative smile down both sides of her table, announced, "Well, at last Dudley Hallonquist's engagement is admitted. Of course we all knew it was coming, but we couldn't pin either of the

young people down. They'll be married next spring, so Mary's Aunt tells me, and will go straight to the Hall to live."

All of the listening faces showed lively interest.

"A most suitable union," declared Mr. Butler, as he knocked the top off of an egg.

"A beautiful romance,—it is what I would call simply *sweet*," tittered a virgin of sixty, while old Mrs. Battle, who carried the families of Virginia as a chatelaine carries her keys, never missing a lock with her first fitting, boomed out in a very deep voice:

"It is perfect! Dudley's mother is gratified. Poor dear soul, now perhaps life may bring her some happiness again. She has never revived from the death of her husband,—a devotion and depth of affection seldom found in these trivial days."

Chris stared hard at his plate. It might have been squirming with beetles for all that he saw there, or all that he afterwards ate.

His Miss Mary! It could be no other! She was going to marry that long, spindling Hallonquist man, who lived in the "Pride of Dunrobin." His Mary would own that mansion, would be finer and infinitely farther away from the circle of Chris's daily existence.

He excused himself hastily, and without trusting one glance toward the Rectory hurried downtown to the dingy small office.

Before either partner arrived, Chris was out in

the suburbs "collecting," as a note left on Mr. Youngblood's desk declared.

But the boy stopped at no cabin or shanty. No grannies nor possums were baited. Like a wounded wild thing he must get to the coverts of the forest.

He flung himself down in the first shady dell, and began his long battle.

"You're a fool,—a plumb, damn fool, Chris Laird," he cried to the bushes that hid him. "That there lady warn't never for such as you. It be right she should take up with the prettiest man in the valley. He air rich, with a big house to give her. I ought to be glad she have hooked such a likely he-critter,—but,—oh, Mary,—Miss Mary," he sobbed, while his great frame shook and rolled in the grasses, "if ye'd only bin bred to the mountings, an' me loved an' co'ted ye there! Oh, I cain't do withouten ye, Mary. I cain't do withouten ye, nohow!"

Chris rose after a while. Bits of grass and torn leaves clung like flakes of green wax to his clothing. The air was filled with the crushed bitter-sweet of bruised herbage. The boy reared his head like a stag; he had caught the sliding of water.

Beside the half-hidden stream, he knelt and bathed his red eyes and his hot swollen face. The broad shoulders went back. He had "twitched," as it were, his mantle of grey, and must off to the work of existence. He thought that he knew,

with the sure knowledge agony brings us, that his whole life was to be lived "withouten" Miss Mary.

Returning to Dunrobin, Chris paused at each humble, recalcitrant doorway, and the rent money turned in at the office by noon of that day caused the firm to raise their collector's wages.

There was a day when old Mrs. Battle appeared with her face slightly ravaged by tears. "Yes," she said, "it is only too true that poor Mrs. Hallonquist is ill,—very ill. Now that her son's future is certain,—for she loves Mary Baring like a daughter,—it looks as if the poor weary soul was too tired to keep on with life. She doesn't want to get well," announced Mrs. Battle, and choked just a little in speaking. "She admits that the one thing she longs for now is to join her young husband."

"Will her death stop the wedding, do you think?" inquired Ossie, who for some inscrutable reason had taken an active dislike to Miss Baring.

"Certainly not," rejoined Mrs. Battle. "It's the worst luck in the world to postpone such a date. And besides, poor Dudley will be needing a wife more than ever."

A few days before the simple ceremony, arranged to take place in the Rectory parlour with only the closest of relatives present, Mary sought out Christopher Laird.

"I want you to come. Now *promise* me, Chris,

you'll be there when I'm married. We've only a handful of friends, because of poor Dudley's deep mourning. But you must be one of them, Chris,—or I'll *never* get over it. Can I count on your coming?"

"Yes," gulped poor Chris, "I'll be there. And Miss Mary——"

"What is it, dear Chris?"

"Should you take it as too all-fired for'ard,—as askin' too much,—ef I asked you, to—to——"

"You can ask me just anything, Chris," said the girl, her full heart brimming up at the sight of his cruel embarrassment. "You couldn't ask anything wrong."

"It's just this, then, Miss Mary," the boy said, determined to force his plea through by an effort. "The brides in these parts they carries bokays with them, don't they,—same as we do in the mountings?"

"Yes, indeed," cried Mary, her eyes bright as she took in his meaning. "And you'll gather the flowers for my wedding bouquet? Is that it?"

"You can reckon," said Chris, and the ghost of a smile made his homely face charming. "I'll pick out just the sweet-smellin' white uns,—and bind them up like a big cabbage, with small bits of grass, and them shaky green ferns about the edges."

So Chris was there, and the picture of Mary,—his Mary,—in her simple organdy gown, a mist

of tulle veiling, and her bouquet of flowers, small white roses, and pale honeysuckle bound with ferns, and wee nameless sprites of wild blooms from the hillsides, was a vision he drew to his heart, enclosing, and consciously holding it, his cross and his altar in one.

CHAPTER V

A STUDY OF COCOONS

WITHIN a few months of the Hallonquist wedding, Leezer died, leaving an infant, her second child, Letty.

Miss Ossie moved to the Gaither house at once, to take charge of "poor James" and to do her full duty by "poor Leezer's" children. That she did it no soul in Dunrobin pretended to doubt.

Chris was haled down from his attic logarithm, rather unwillingly, for the boy had become used to his den. He was given a larger and a pleasanter room in the servants' wing over the Gaither kitchen.

At the north Chris looked down on a trampled, neglected square of weeds, which he quickly transformed to a garden, worthy mate to the one just abandoned.

Miss Quigley was quite in despair. "That nice boy," she wailed out to her circle of sympathy. "I don't know what we'll do now he's gone. The garden has never been kept up as he kept it. Why, the vegetable carts never stopped at my door any more."

As Chris delved in his new bit of earth, he felt sure that the winged, crawling "critters" began one by one to follow him. He welcomed each as a friend.


His copy-book now had been filled. To continue the writing, he purchased a thickish new one. At this time Chris did not know the terms "diary" or "journal," so he called it "My Memory Book." Nor had he acquired toward these soliloquies any sense of diurnal obligation. He wrote only when something had happened that seemed to him worth putting down.

The lonely boy's first sense of "home," his first reaching out for a conscious environment, was when Ossie told him he could drive nails in his walls as he pleased. There was no plaster to injure, for the room was ceiled and painted throughout a pale sooty grey.

One day, from a long hillside ramble, he brought tenderly back a branch of a tulip-poplar from which hung a shaggy cocoon. He thought that he knew the sort of small red-brown butterfly that was soon to emerge from the aerial cell, but it would be lots of fun to watch it while breaking.

The branch he intended to fasten just over his mantel, where he could see it first thing every morning.

But to do this he had to take down a framed picture, a lithograph, once brightly coloured, called "The Rock of Ages." It showed a husky young



woman, in a rotary attitude, clothed in a very stiff white garment, and clinging with manicured fingers to a huge cross in mid-ocean.

With the picture removed and held in one waving hand, Chris stood still to consider. Of course if Sis "ketched" him there might be some trouble, but Ossie, as far as he knew, never came to his room.

"Shucks!" he muttered at length, putting the picture well back of a three-legged bureau,—“that there girl couldn't a' swum through such waves in her nightgown, a leavin' it plumb full of starch. And besides, nobody could build such a cross in the ocean. This here butterfly-ball is a whole darned sight truer, and more pretty.”

After this, other branches and other cocoons found lodgment against the same grey walls. A brilliant crab-spider placed in the feathery twigs of a sparkle-berry branch, began instantly, to Chris's delight, to spin his silvery kite-frame.

Queer-shaped small eggs, undoubtedly reptilian, sluggish larvæ, needing tin cans and mud, along with whole slices of bark harbouring globules that hinted of hatching, were garnered so fast, that Chris was sore put about to find niches for all of them.

One day, in the squalid back-alley of James Weldon & Co. Chris chanced to see a discarded old spool-chest, consisting of four drawers, the lowest one broken. Forgetting his shyness, he rushed into

the store and, encountering Miss Theresa, the "Co." of the firm, solicited and obtained the crude cabinet.

In Miss Ossie's well-ordered household were two servants, a very fat cook, who was black as the stove that she baked in, called Aunt Ninny, and a bright yellow maiden of seventeen, who, in response to her new mistress' query, announced herself briefly as Baby Doll.

"Baby Doll! Baby Doll what?" asked Ossie. She was not yet accustomed to negroes, and suspected the girl of impertinence.

"My pappy's named Jenkins,—Mr. Paul Peter Jenkins," the questioned one replied amiably. "Dat'll make my full Baby Doll name Miss Baby Doll Jenkins."

"I don't care for your family name," Miss Ossie remarked rather sharply. "What I'm meaning to ask is, whether there isn't some reasonable thing I can call you, like Jane or Maria?"

"We don't hol' to dem po' white-trash names," Miss Baby Doll retorted, tossing a halo of thick anti-kink wool, "but de name dat my ole' granny give me——"

"Yes, that's just what I want," Miss Ossie threw in with relief. "Something——"

"It is Miss Queen Victoria Jenkins, an'——"

Miss Ossie's control was a triumph.

"Very well, Baby Doll," and she turned around,

beckoning royalty to follow, "come with me and I'll learn you your duties."

To her mistress one day Baby Doll brought a round-eyed complaint. "Mr. Chris is done locked up his do', an' car'd de key to his office."

"Locked his door!" repeated Miss Ossie with her quick nervous frown. "Are you certain? Won't some other of the keys fit it?"

"Nome," said Baby Doll pertly. "I is tried to de las'. It's one of dese new-fangled *jail* locks Mr. Chris is done bought fer hisself."

"A Yale lock," murmured Miss Ossie, looking thoughtful. "Well, Baby Doll, you go on with your work, I'll see Mr. Chris when he comes."

"It's just this-a-way, Sis," he began, in the tone of the boy from the mountains. "You 'lowed as it was my own special room, and somehow I'm gettin' plumb crazy about it. I've got critters there——"

"I knew it!" cried Miss Ossie in triumph. "Spiders, beetles and slugs, and of course there'll be bedbugs,—in my house too! I can't understand your wanting to have insecks around you, Chris Laird, when you've got all outdoors crawlin' with 'em."

"But I ain't, Sis, I ain't!" the boy cried excitedly. "That's my trouble. Everybody's got outdoors, same as me. I is getting to care for my room because it's like my outdoors in my pocket. I'll spread up my own bed, Sis, 'clar to

gracious I will. I don't care much for life here in these lowlands, nohow. And that there little room is getting to be like a piece of the mountings."

Chris did not smile often. When he did, it was hard to resist. And, after all, Ossie dearly loved this shy, no-count young brother.

"Well, it's plumb foolish of me," she smiled tentatively.


Chris's eyes shone. By that single word "plumb" he knew he had won.

The summer and autumn slipped by. Chris had been once to Hallonquist Hall, and had been taken through its great chambers. The main hallway, and two flights of stairs, curving upward "like a big turkey wishbone," impressed him most deeply of all.

Dudley Hallonquist liked Chris, and wondered, in speaking with Mary, why the boy constantly refused the young husband's very sincere invitations. Mary smiled in her heart, for she knew.

Christmas neared them. On the night before the holiday Chris, returning quite late from a visit, his third one to Hallonquist Hall, locked his door, lit his slanting gas bracket, and opened his old "Memory Book."

"This is Christmas Eve, 187—. I have just come from the Hall, where I tooken a present to Miss Mary. I should have said, I taken the present, for I promised Sis I would try to do better on grammer.



I seen it at Jas. Weldon and Co. and got Miss Teresy, who is a good friend of mine, to put it one side till I could pay for it gradual. It's a big photograp album made out of long-haired red velvet, with a posey in chaney on top. The flowers is meant to be roses.

I am feeling real lonesome tonight. It's the same sort of feeling you have when the mists hide your sheep, and don't none of them bleat none. You gets to wondering whether or no hants can be in the mist.

Miss Mary is sweeter than ever she was in her girl days. When she looks at her man it's like sunshine bust out on blue flowers. Then she looks round at me, and the sun it ain't shining so bright.

I'm plumb glad she's happy. I want her to have of the best that God gives to His critters. I can't figger out as it's wicked for me to keep on loving Miss Mary, but if it was a sin, I must keep on being a sinner.

Miss Mary is going to have a young one before very long. I knows things such as this from tending a many a mother-sheep, and nussing my white fox and litter. I often wonder where my fox is a-roamin' by now.

If Miss Mary should die when her hour comes, like Leezer, I ain't aiming to bide in the valley. I wouldn't care if Sis threw a duck-fit, I would nachally take up my foot in my hand and go back to the mountains. I wouldn't endure to stay round here if that happened, nohow.

I don't bleeve it will happen. Miss Mary will live and do fine. I hopes that she'll give us a girl-child that looks like herself, not its Paw.

Miss Mary she give me my Christmas gift before leaving. It is a new fatched-on pipe she calls meershawm

and is held in a brown leather case lined with purple like duelling pistols. I ain't aiming never to smoke it.

The last word what she spoke not another soul heard it. She said, 'Good-night and good-bye, dear dear friend, and God bless you.' It mout 'a' been angels a-singin'.

Miss Mary loves God. I think I'll try loving Him too. Amen and no more for tonight. Tomorrow'll be Christmas."

CHAPTER VI

THE GREAT FIRE

LITTLE Sophie Delvoe Dudley Hallonquist, the last of her name and race, was just three years old when Hallonquist Hall burned to the ground.

By a singular chance, the fire took place on the actual night of her birthday, March the eighth.

The brilliant and adored little being had been given her first party. Mammy Tempey had baked her a cake the size of a white velvet footstool, and topped it with three pigmy candles. There was pink lemonade in the huge priceless punch-bowl of Royal Worcester, and wide platters of small cakes, covered with pink and white icing.

All of juvenile Dunrobin, that happy portion chancing to fall in between the ages of three and ten years of age, came with the usual attendance of nurses, and mothers, and unmarried aunts. Chris had brought Mildred and Letty, Miss Ossie having declined the Hallonquist invitation.

The old mansion had not worn such an air of elation since long "'fo' de war." The two Hallonquist servants, coal-black Uncle Grief, and his comely fat wife, Mammy Tempey, were like children

themselves in their tremulous excitement and pride.

"Hit's de good ole days come back once mo'," panted Tempey, as she staggered indoors with the cake, her brick kitchen being some distance out to the northwest of the big house, and directly under the branches of the arboreal apostle St. Mark.

"I's done felt it comin'—I's drempt it," she emphasized, her fair load being placed on the table. "Even de good Lawd, he knows you can't keep er Hallonquist down."

"Ain't it so, Duck?" voiced Grief from the fireplace, where, on his knees, he was piling the great oak logs, and setting a small aromatic starting of "lightwood." "Hit's de trufe, as ever you spoke it. Cream an' soap-suds an' quality, dey all rises to whar dey belongs."

At four o'clock a gay trooping in of white-frocked, beribboned small fairies began. The whole house was made sweet by the laughter of children.

Little Sophie in white, with a huge rose-coloured sash, and an incredible bow on the top of her curly bronzed head, showed herself at three to possess the innate gifts of a hostess.

"Tum and see my bid take," she would cry out to each new arrival. "You're to have tum, a bid thlice, betausen you're tumpany. But Mammy, she made it for me, betausen it's my birfday."

Dudley Hallonquist, after giving a courteous

welcome to his guests, began to thread his way through the groups, as if he had lost something. He had not seen his wife for ten minutes, and was beginning to miss her.

He found her, withdrawn from the circle of fire-light, standing alone in the shadows, her eyes lambent with rapture, fixed on Sophie.

"Oh, *Dudley*," Mary Hallonquist breathed, as the young husband joined her, "did you *ever* see anything quite so enchanting as Baby? Sometimes the child actually frightens me,—she's so smart, and so lovely, and—and——"

"Dynamic," laughed Dudley, supplying the one perfect word.

"I wonder," mused Mary, as she caught at his hand in the semi-darkness, "whether it's just because we adore her so much and are blinded, or whether Sophie really is the most *beautiful* child ever born."

"She's the prettiest thing on earth, next to one," gallant Dudley assured her. "And I'm the happiest man in the world!"

At eight the great grandfather's clock in the hallway chimed out the hour of departure.

Later on Tempey, groaning and grumbling, now that the strain of excitement was over, climbed the creaking old steps to her bedroom over the kitchen, while her spouse, made hilarious because of certain potations, not all pink lemonade, which "young Marster" had offered his few male guests, and

his hopeful-eyed butler as well, stayed behind to bank up the glowing fires.

This office was hastily performed. The night had grown cold, and a fierce northwest wind began to blow. The thought of his big feather-bed, and the gleam of a humbler hearthstone, wrought strange yearnings in the bosom of Grief.

Through the night the wind steadily increased. It roared in the branches of Saints Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, with the sound of breakers on rocks. Even the house shook at times, as if squaring itself to the tempest.

It was perhaps two o'clock when Mary Hallonquist was wakened by the smell of acrid paint-smoke in her nostrils. She sprang from her bed, screaming, "Dudley,—there's fire in the house!" and then she ran to gather up Sophie.

The child always declared she remembered it, from that first agonized cry and the waking clutch of her mother, to the instant—five minutes, an hour, or a century later—when her struggling, protesting young body was borne through a bright world in flames, and shut in to the stifling black safety of Nurse Tempey's room.

This tragedy, set on the child's soul its first blazing date of self-consciousness: on a mind which, even at that early age, was alert and retentive it seared a lifelong impression.

And half of that splendour of fire which she caught, before fate, in the person of Tempey, hurled

her down to a big feather-bed and closed the room-curtains,—was because of the wind. The demoniac March wind that shrieked triumph about the proud mansion, beating down on its head with invisible flails, until sparks would fly up in great hissing rushes, or burst sidewise in clouds of bright grain.

The blaze which was to cause such destruction had begun from the carelessly banked fire in the dining-room, back of the parlour, and separated only by old-fashioned sliding mahogany doors, the two rooms taking up the west length of the first floor. Above them were the sleeping apartments occupied by Mr. and Mrs. Hallonquist and the baby.

Before his wife's cry was an echo, Dudley stood on his feet. Taking time only to light a candle, then to jerk on a pair of high shoes with no socks, and wrap his long frame in an old flowered dressing-robe that had belonged to his father, Hallonquist sped down the stairs and out to the kitchen.

"Run, Uncle Grief, run, run for your life, and begin ringing your old Baptist church-bell. Some neighbour will hear and spread the alarm. They'll hear us in spite of the wind. The Hall is on fire inside, and the flames will break through any instant. And, Tempey," cried the desperate voice, "throw on something,—throw on anything quick,—and come to your mistress. I'm afraid she'll go wild in this horror, and I count on your caring for Sophie."

He tore back to the hall, flung the rear doors wide open, and was met by a volume of smoke.

"Mary! Mary!" he screamed, "you *must* hurry. The dining-room wall is buckling now, and your floor may crash through. Bring Sophie down."

"Yes, Dudley, I'm coming," her voice answered queerly. "But I can't find one of baby's shoes."

"Oh, my God," thought the frenzied husband, "she is going fire-mad! What on earth shall I do?"

As he started upstairs, at his heels came Tempey running. "Whar's my child?" she called out. "Dey ain't nobody but jes' ole Tempey gwinter save de las' ob de Hallonquists. Wharbouts Miss Mary done put her?"

"Oh, Tempey, go quick. They are both in the bedroom. Your poor mistress has quite lost her head," the man panted. "Take the baby, don't let Mary touch her. I'll look after Mary myself."

"Glory be! Dar's de bell rung a'ready," Tempey took breath to announce. "Grief's a-ringin' jes' ez if he might bring down Gawd on dat bell-rope. Da'll be he'p comin' here in a minute. Lord! De flames is squeezin' out th'oo de dinin'-room keyhole,—Marster Jesus, hab mercy 'pon dy people!"

Tempey drove into the bedroom, where Mary, distracted and vacant, was sobbing and laughing aloud, now catching up the terrified baby, now flinging her back to the bed, in order that she, the

poor mother, might scramble about on all-fours, determined—as the one thing important—to find the still missing shoe.

Catching sight of her nurse, little Sophie held out straining arms of relief. Tempey snatched the child up, and wrapping her around with a blanket bore her burden down the stairs, with no further concern for the mother.

Dudley passed Tempey now on his way to rescue his wife. “Try to calm yourself, darling,” he pleaded. “You *must* put on some shoes and a wrap,—and come with me out of this burning building.”

“Oh, not into the night, and that horrible, horrible shrieking,” wailed Mary. “And my pretty things here in the bureau,—all of my linen and laces,—and that *dear* little sewing-table over there in the corner. Your dear mother gave it to me for my own. I *won't* go and leave my table.”

“I'll come back and get it,” coaxed Dudley, seeing it was essential to humour her.

Chris stood in the smoke-curling doorway. From below, in the hall, rose the trampling of many feet.

“Oh, thank God, help has come!” muttered Dudley.

“Hallonquist! Hey there,—you,—hello, Dudley!” came voices and cries through the smoke. “Come down here and point out the things you want saved. We're all ready, and there's no time to lose.”

"I must go," Dudley choked. "There's my books and my Chippendale desk,—and my papers. The library wing is untouched. May I leave my poor Mary with you, Chris? You must manage to get her away,—and to slip on some things. She will die in the cold if she doesn't."

"I'll take care of her," said Chris. "Run along to your books and your papers."

"Now, Miss Mary," Chris began, strolling toward her, with a gait as serene as though it were over green meadows. "Seems like we'd better search around for some gyarmints."

"But my *sewing-table*, dear Chris," whimpered Mary, looking up in his face with the eyes of a small frightened child. "Dudley wants me to leave it, and it was given me by his own mother. I *couldn't* do that. Now, could I?"

"You can reckon!" affirmed Chris genially. "You and me we'll tote it out together. But you can't do your share of the lifting in your night-gown, and no shoes on your feet. Here, sit down here. They ain't no manner of hurry. I can slip on those shoes in a wink. There! It's did. What'd I tell you! And next thing is to find a horse blanket, or wrapper, or something to cover you up from the wind. Where do you keep all them clothes you been wearing?"

"Over there in the wardrobe with mirrors," Mary replied, pointing a trembling finger. "All

my dresses are there on the hooks, and on that top shelf, is a *brand* new bonnet."

"We'll just grab up a armful of doo-dingles, and chuck them out the window," said Chris, suiting the deed to his words. "Now here's a man's sort of coat," he remarked, selecting a warm woollen ulster. "It's the thing what you're needing right now. Stick your arms in for Chris,—that's a lady. Now just wait until I heft up this table,—no, I won't let the drawers clatter out,—don't you see I'm slanting it careful?"

All the while Chris was talking, he was at pains to keep Mary's attention closely fixed upon himself, in an effort to prevent her terror overcoming his authority.

"Look, Miss Mary," he continued, "you reach down and grab onto a leg. That will do,—it's the same as the others. And don't you let go, not if hell busts loose on the stairway. Steady now through the door. Hold your breath, for the smoke is something pizen. Here's the steps. Remember they's curving. There ain't nothing to think on, but just gitting your table safe out in the yard."

It was Chris's quickly formed purpose to take Mary and her table directly to the lower floor of the two-storeyed brick kitchen, and there leave them, in order to rush back and assist in the more general salvage of furniture. But this plan was prevented by his companion's frenzy of fear at the sight of the big house on fire.

She relinquished her hold on the table, and would have sped back into the flames, but that Chris, casting his burden down on the turf near the kitchen, overtook and restrained the frantic woman in his arms.

He pressed her face hard to the dark of his shoulder, smoothing the silken, fair head, and whispering short soothing phrases.

He felt how the slim body trembled. Now and then a new paroxysm of terror caught her, and she struggled and fought to be free.

"There,—there,—now, Miss Mary," the man would say gently, "don't you kick up like that. You just bide,—you bide quiet-like here,—and Chris won't let nothing tech you."

"But my husband and the baby! Oh, where are they, Chris,—I must find them," she lamented. "They may be back there in the fire. Oh, my Father in Heaven!"

"Sophie's safe as a bug in a rug up to Tempey's room," Chris assured her. "And your man, he's safe too. He's helping to pitch out his books from the liberry. I can see him from here. No, you don't have to look.

"My Good Lawd!" he cried out, as he saw one of the tall chimneys totter, and heard wild warnings. "Stand back there, Mr. Hallonquist. You can't go in again. God, man! don't you see that the wall's coming?"

A great crash and a roar,—and Chris clapped

a trembling hand hard down to Mary Hallonquist's ear, straining her head to his coat until it pained her.

A cry like a horse trapped by fire came from old Uncle Grief. "It's got him! It's fell on young Marster. Yes, it did, fer I seen him. Down dar, —oh, young Marster! down dar in de red, blazin' timbers, wid de bricks mashin' flat on his haid!"

Chris now lifted Mary as lightly as though it were Sophie, and ran up the kitchen stairs, kicking madly at Tempey's closed door. "Lemme in, you black woman!" he thundered. "Do you hear me? Lemme in!"

"Who's dat a-batterin' an' er-bangin'?" screamed back Tempey. "I won't let dat hell-fiah in here. I'm savin' de baby."

"You open this door or I'll bust it," said Chris, in a tone which made Tempey quickly turn the key.

"I'm totin' Miss Mary,—she's fainted. Never mind about Sophie," he hurried on, gasping, and, staggering in with his load, laid the limp drooping form on the bed.

"Is she daid? Oh, Miss Mary,—Miss Mary——"

"Oh, shut up,—you catamount, you!—" said the man with his first hint of weariness. "She's just swounded, and a piece of luck too. You take care of her, Tempey, I must get me down back to the fire."

"Reckon I kin take keer of my own, 'thout no

po' white trasher projeckin' round givin' orders," mumbled Tempey, as she knelt by the bed and began chafing her mistress' slim wrists.

As Chris ran down the steps, a new sound filled the blazing cup of the sky. It was as if millions of lizards and other small reptiles were being burned alive. There was squeaking, and tiny sharp screams,—then long hisses, and sometimes one great detonation, when a branch full of hot, boiling sap would explode.

Chris knew it to be the doomed monarch, St. Luke, which at his post to the southeast of the mansion, received the full volume of flame.

"Well, at least," muttered Chris, as he threaded his way through the heaps of piled up and broken furniture that were set all about in the grass, "the old kitchen, and big old St. Mark won't get none of that fiery furnace."

Dr. Stepp, Dunrobin's leading physician, was fortunately present. He and Chris together dragged the unconscious and terribly burned Dudley Hallonquist from the mass of ruins that had caught him. It was Chris who suggested the ironing-room on the lower floor next to the kitchen, and there the poor victim was borne.

Chris always held it as one of his blessings that Miss Mary remained practically unconscious, through the remainder of that dreadful night.

When he found that there was nothing more to do for poor Hallonquist—merciful death having

come to him swiftly—Chris remounted the stairs to the room, which gave forth the faint acrid odours belonging to all negro dwellings,—and drew up his chair to the bed.

Aunt Tempey and Grief were below, with all that was left of “young Marster,” and could not be prevailed on to leave him.

The grey dawn slowly parted the curtains which Tempey had closed in order to keep out the fire.

A thin, spectral gleam fell directly on Mary’s upturned face, making darker the rim of long brown lashes. Her lips were held close, and the line from her chin to her throat had the curve of a flower.

Chris’s red sunken eyes fed on her face. In his heart he was trying to pray.

“Oh, my God,” he began, “my Father in heaven,—Miss Mary has said you’re my Father, as well as her own, so it must be true. I ain’t been very good. I ain’t set out to serve you, but I’ll do it from now till hell splits and the coals freeze over, if you’ll only let Mary get well. There’s her little child beyonst her, a-sleeping away ’thout dreaming her poor Paw is killed. Little Sophie’ll be needing her Maw more than ever. We all needs her. And I know plumb well, Lawd, in your place,—I couldn’t turn my back square on an orphint. I don’t ’low as how you could do it, Lawd, neether. I’m a-counting on you to be fair,—an’ I’ll promise to serve you.

"There! She is moving her eyes and her fingers. She's coming to life as I prays. Thankee, Lawd, for responding so quick-like. I'll promise I'll never forget. There, Miss Mary, there's Sophie a-waking. Is you better, Miss Mary, poor lamb? There, that's right,—try to set up a little. Chris will boost your back up on his arm."

Mary sprang up in bed, staring wildly. The red sun was just topping the trees.

"Oh, the fire,—the fire!" she moaned. "I remember! And Sophie, thank Heaven, she's safe," Mary cried fervently, catching the child to her breast.

When her wild eyes turned to Chris with the question "Where is my husband?" Chris covered his face with his hands.

CHAPTER VII

THE PROPHECY

FOR several years after the fire, little Sophie and her mother lived on in the Hallonquist kitchen. All the young widow asked of her friends was to leave her alone, with the Hallonquist servants, near the place where her husband had lived.

There was nothing heroic in Mary. Like a broken-winged bird she trailed through her days of bereavement, praying often and long: "Help me now, O my Father in heaven, and give me strength to endure."

Young Laird came almost daily to see her, and with him always appeared his second niece, Letty, a pleasant and moderate child, more like a sister than a friend of the little Sophie.

By this time Sophie was a regular attendant at Aunt Baring's school; and the most potent weapon as yet used against the little girl's mother, was the fact that at recess, the other pupils taunted the Hallonquist child with having to live in her own father's kitchen.

Arriving one fair afternoon, Chris found his hostess's long lashes still darkened by tears.

"Auntie Baring has been here again, and she *is* cross," Mary admitted, when questioned. "According to her, the whole town has come to believe me a m-m-mon-ster! They say I am selfish to keep Sophie here living in a kitchen, when three homes have been offered us. But I can't *bear* to leave it,—the trees,—the long rows of lilac, and the vine-covered foundations where Sophie's big mansion once stood. No, I *can't*, Chris. That's final. They'll just have to think me a *monster*!"

The last sentence came out with much spirit and a lift of the golden-brown head.

"You bet they can think as they will," Chris gave hearty response. "As for us, I suggest that you throw on a hat, and we stroll down toward Hallonquist Park."

As the two friends approached the rim of the forest, Chris began: "It's been borne to my mind here of late that this here plot of land, for all it looks so big and showy, don't do you a God's mite of good. Come now, honest, Miss Mary,—now does it?"

"In practical good,—no—I suppose not. But as part of my daughter's inheritance——"

"Exactly," interrupted Chris. "Your daughter! She's just where I'm p'inting. Sophie's getting a big little girl, as pretty as posies, and, high-spirited, just like her Maw. You've been and told how them children at Mrs. Baring's school has traduced her?"

"Yes, yes, Auntie told me. It was frightful!" Mary faltered, with a catch of the breath. "You mean, for her sake, I should sell the old Park, and build us a new little home on the Hallonquist Hall foundations?"

"I mean just that thing," Chris declared. "You were sure quick to grab it."

"But," cried his companion, "there's no one to buy. All my friends are straitened in means, just as I am. The war wiped out riches among us."

"But not in the North and the West. There's a Yankee in town,—a critter named Whitlock. He's a nice fellow, too,—though of course I don't reckon you'll believe it. He's buying up land all about. Me and him," the speaker pursued, now clearing his throat, and with eyes carefully turned from "Miss Mary," "just happened to stroll through this pawk no later than yesterday morning."

"Just *happened*,—Oh, Chris! And what did the Northerner say?" The question shot out before Mary could check it.

Chris laughed. "For one thing, he said he 'lowed your big oaks and walnuts were, by Jove, the plumb best that ever he has seen."

"I'm surprised such a person could really appreciate beauty," the other said haughtily. "Those big trees are famous throughout all Virginia. Of course I won't sell."

Chris's new-sprung jocosity withered. "Now

you look-a-here, now, Miss Mary," he protested. "That last speech of yours come from spite, and not from good judgment. We are facing hard facts. If you don't sell to Whitlock—if you turns down this offer which mayn't come again for ten years—that's one side of the picture. What we got to do—you and me—is to swivel her round, and study the opposyte surface."

"Very well. Turn it over," Mary retorted a little unkindly. "What is it you think we shall see?"

"I discern life for you and your daughter under a roof not your own—for one thing," Chris gravely responded. "Somehow, I can't think of you caring for such."

"No indeed, dear Chris! I just tried to act 'uppish,' as old Tempey says, because I'm feeling so wretched. I know you are right about selling. I am going to think of it *hard*."

The two friends had turned, and were making their way up the long gentle slope toward the three giant oaks, the two-storeyed brick building, and the tumbled and vine-wreathed foundations, when, from out of the kitchen where Tempey was rolling biscuit for supper, rose a high, minor hymn,—

"Oh, Josuph wuz an ol' man,
An ol', ol' man wuz he;
An' yit he ma'aied Jesus' Maw
Way down to Galilee.

Yes, Josuph wuz an ol' man
His teef wuz los' at sea,
An' yit he ma'aied Mary
Way down to Galilee."

"Lucky Joseph," sighed Chris, with a twitch to his grave, pleasant mouth.

Mary did not reply except by a slight, nervous hastening of steps on the grass. Chris gazed hungrily at her. A tiny west wind had sprung up, and it stirred the soft blur on her temples, lifting a few shining hairs, as with fingers, and as tenderly replaced the strands.

A great throb of love and of longing drove through Christopher's heart. Unlike Joseph, he possessed neither hope nor equipment to marry this exquisite Mary; but his love had increased, year by year, until now it seemed all of life that really existed.

Perhaps Mary felt the dumb longing; perhaps it was only the stir of that coquetry latent in most pious women, but an impulse made her suddenly turn, extending both hands.

"Oh, Chris—dear old Chris," she cried out with a thrill in her voice. "How on *earth* could I get on without you!"

Chris gulped. A swift tide of ecstasy stained his big quivering face. "You don't have to," was all he could mutter. "You don't have to nohow, Miss Mary."

The next morning, as Mrs. Hallonquist was seated upstairs in her bedroom, she heard from the yard below, a melodious "Howdy, there! Hello, air you there, Miss Mary?"

She ran out to the narrow verandah and hung over the rail. "Why, Chris *Laird*! What on earth! Come right up and I'll start the sitting-room fire."

"No, you come down to me," countermanded the guest, grinning broadly. "Whitlock's bit. Hurry down, I'm a-sufferin' to tell it."

Chris, his eyes being set on the upper house-storey, had failed to perceive, that, during his gay badinage with "Miss Mary," at the pane of a dim kitchen window a few yards straight before him two frightened black faces were pressed.

As he talked, four rolling white eyeballs darted sidewise, then upward to heaven, and again back on a swift horizontal, to their answering kind.

Mary ran down the steps like a girl, and the two dusky faces withdrew into the general shadow.

"Come right up to the old Hall foundations," Chris suggested. "That's the suitable spot for the talk we must do. We can plan right off now for the spot to begin your small cottage——"

As the two walked away, their eager excited voices gradually lowered with distance, Tempey set arms akimbo, and glared at her alarmed spouse.

"What I tell you! I said dat I know dey was

cookin' up devilmint. Dey is plannin' to sell Sophie's lan', jes' de same as I drempt in my vision. You 'member I tole you dat dream?"

Grief squeaked out a hasty remembrance.

"'Bout de powers of evil, what's tryin' to projec' wid Sophie's birf'right?"

"An' you' wid Gawd's angel, beatin' 'em off wid a broomstick," cried Grief, with flattering swiftness.

"An' I's likely to do hit ergin,—in broad day, widout no dreamin'," Tempey grimly declared, as she began to draw down her blue gingham sleeves over polished brown forearms. "I's gwinter follow dem white folks out dar to de ruins, an' you come on wid me, you Grief Jonsing,—an' don't you dassent hang back in de bushes."

With the words, she stalked forth, and cast not so much as a glance toward the muttering dejected old man who obediently walked at her heels.

Tempey moved cautiously, as the two white conspirators came within easy hearing. She paused among the high goldenrod plumes, and was in time to hear Mary say yieldingly, "Very well, I give in. I know it is best. You can tell Mr. Whitlock that I'll accept his offer."

"Then," cried Chris, with a resonant groan of relief, "there's no time to be wasted, and I'll take on myself to pace off the front line of your cottage."

He sprang from the long prostrate column on

which he and Mrs. Hallonquist had been sitting, and had reached the top terrace of brick, when Tempey drove forth like a bison.

"You is wastin' yo' time wid dat pacin' an' prancin' on Hallonquist lan', Mr. Laird. Dey ain't goin' to be no small cottage set down whar de big house once stood."

Mary jumped to her feet. "Mercy, Tempey, you frightened me! What on earth do you mean by following us here, and speaking so rudely?"

The woman faced her young mistress with sombre defiance. Her large, motionless outline against the bright yellow brocade of the tall goldenrod had the pose of a figure cut in basalt.

A few yards past her shoulder could be seen the face of old Grief, his plaintive eyes set on Mrs. Hallonquist.

"Miss Mary," and her voice matched the black basalt mien, "de las' words dat my young Marster spoke on dis earth was, 'Mammy Tempey, you look after Sophie. I trus' you. Don't take her to her Maw,—*you* take keer of my baby.'"

"I remember. You have told me that before," said Mary, her face slightly flushed and embarrassed, "and you have been very faithful to the trust that my husband imposed, but that does not excuse you for this interference."

"Me an' Grief overheered you-all talkin' 'bout sellin' de Hallonquist Pawk an' puttin' a low, white-trash cottage right down here"—she dra-

matically pointed—"whar de big Hallonquist Hall once is stood."

"That's true, and what of it?" Chris now enquired, with a hint of impatience. "Just get out of my way on those bricks, and don't bother Miss Mary."

Mary turned swiftly toward him, a hand held up to check and to warn. "No, Chris, it is their affair. Tempey and Grief know well that I couldn't live on for a day unless they were here with me.

"Uncle Grief,—and you, Tempey," she continued, "it has come to a choice of three things,—to break up our life here on Hallonquist land and go to live with Mrs. Baring, Mr. Gaither, or kind little Miss Sally Finger,—to let Sophie spend not only her childhood, but her girlhood and young ladyhood in a kitchen,—or, for the third possibility, to accept a good offer to sell, and build a neat, up-to-date cottage that we all can be proud of."

Tempey's black head was drooping. All her defiance had vanished. "Ef hit mus' be, hit mus'," she conceded forlornly. "But Gawd's han' is hebbly. Ef de new house mus' come, let hit stan' somewhar else, not down here in de place of de big one."

"Why not, Tempey?" the young mistress asked in surprise. "It's the logical spot for the new cottage. The brick walk is already laid down to the gate, and the lilacs on either side are so superb."

"No po' buckra cabin kin go in *dis* place," the black woman repeated firmly yet with a rhythmic croon in her voice. "I's drempt dreams an' saw visions. All de glory of lan' an' possessions dey will come back th'oo Sophie. De big Hall it is gwinter be built, higher up an' mo' splendid an' shinin'. She will switch th'oo dat mansion, wid a hunderd silk petticoats rustlin'. Her chilluns will run in an out. I knows what I's sayin', Miss Mary. De Angel of de Lawd he is tetched me——"

"De Lawd's Angel is tetched her," wailed Grief, beginning to sob.

"An' he sed, 'Tempey, good times is comin'.' Lak Job what was giv' mo' big houses, an' sheeps, an' fine wives an' chillun dan ever de Lawd tuk to try him,—little Sophie will come to her own.

"You kin build dat small cottage," she agreed, now looking at Mary. "But you set hit down dar in de shade of de 'Postle St. John. Don't you lay down one squinchy red brick in de face of dese ole ones,—an' de Lawd, He will prosper yo' days."

Chris still regarded it all as a joke, and was greatly astonished to find Mary sobered and thoughtful.

"You surely can't mean that you'd pay any attention to that black woman's franzies," he began, when Tempey and Grief were both well out of hearing.

"Tempey's dreamed dreams before," answered

Mary. "And who knows,—when Sophie is so pretty——"

So the new foundation was set well to the west of the old one, in the shade of the benevolent St. John, and there the little home was built.

CHAPTER VIII

DARK WATERS

FOR a few happy years Mary Hallonquist knew only peace, and a tranquil contentment.

The widow possessed now, as income, the fixed pittance accruing from a few salted down thousands left over from the sale of Hallonquist Park, plus a feeble uncertain amount, supposed to be paid in twice-yearly from her shares in the shot tower works.

By the time that Sophie was ten years of age, and the two servants grown older and,—as is invariably the way of their race,—more childish and exigent, Mary found herself facing a winter threatening worse than privation. The black spectre of debt leered already from out of the quite empty coal cellar, and whispered a hundred small needs which, for some malign reason, appeared to have come all at once.

Apart from the household demands, and Sophie's insistence on clothing which would keep the other girls at school from making fun of her Mrs. Hallonquist found that the taxes on her vine-covered cottage were a different thing from the few dollars paid for the former kitchen residence.

From just after noon, on a certain bleak day in November, a thin powdered snow, the first of the season, had been steadily falling.

In the house Mary Hallonquist moved about restlessly. She would look at the clock on the mantel, and then go to the window again, staring upward to watch the grey skies. She was hoping the clouds might pass before Sophie started home from school.

After one of the long brooding pauses, Mary turned and went out through the farce of a small "butler's pantry" directly into the kitchen.

Tempey sat close to the stove peeling onions. Her bowed head was wrapped in a square of dark crimson cloth, an unmistakable sign that what Uncle Grief called "de ole lady's tantrums" had taken demoniac possession.

Mary sighed. She had worries enough of her own, though lacking Tempey's naïve way of proclaiming them.

"Have our groceries come yet?" the mistress inquired, in a voice rather meek and concessive.

"What's done come is right dar on de table," grumbled Tempey, her head nodding sidewise. "If dey'd bin snakes dey sho' would a' bit you," she added, in a cadence that plainly implied she would not have regretted the actual presence of serpents.

Mary went to the small heap of parcels, nervously fingering each. She was trying to compute, with a mind devoid of all mathematical finesse,

what the outlay had cost. From this effort, her troubled thoughts turned to the hope that, since the snow was so heavy nothing had been forgotten, when Tempey as if she had guessed what her mistress was thinking, growled out, "We ain't got a drap er dat se-yup—an' dat grocer-man nigger ain't brought me my risin'-powder."

"Oh, dear me!" cried the anxious housekeeper. "Are you sure that you mentioned the baking powder? You sometimes forget. We can't do without those two things. Sophie eats almost nothing for breakfast, but her batter-cakes and molasses."

Aunt Tempey tore off the acrid red skins without comment.

"I'm afraid Uncle Grief will have to go back to town right away, before the snow gets any thicker," Mary suggested.

"Grief wuz up half de night, an' me wid him, wid dat mis'ry in his side."

The much harassed Mary gave a low sound meant for sympathy, came out to the centre of the room, paused, looked down at Tempey, who remained unresponsive, and then in a sudden decision opened the door that led out to the back porch and called "Grief, Uncle Grief, please come here a minute."

At the opening of the door Tempey down by the stove shuddered audibly, and jerked at the front-end of the moth-eaten grey shawl that she wore.

"I do *hate* to ask him," murmured the offender, and closed the aperture hastily.

Uncle Grief, having heard, emerged from the upper brick kitchen, from the room that once had been Mary's. Descending the creaking stairs, he had to move sidewise, with both hands on the railing. Tempey glanced through the window, and the sight seemed to anger her.

"Dis here wedder's de debbil fer my ole man's rheumatics," she grunted. "Ez fer me," she added defiantly, "I hole's in my bref 'twixt here an' my room, fer fear dat plew-rissy gwinter ketch me."

Uncle Grief shuffled in, displaying his wide toothless gums in a gallant attempt at a smile. He was wrapped in an old patchwork quilt, and his black face and hands showed the thin bluish scales which cold spreads on the skin of a darky.

Unlike Tempey, he held no resentments, and when Mary, now almost tearful, asked if he felt well enough to go for the syrup, Grief answered cheerily, "Dat's what my ole bandy laigs is here fer, Miss Ma'ay,—ez long ez dey'll ca'ary me."

A contemptuous snort from the onions was successfully ignored.

A still half-hour fled. Mary, wisely enough, had retired to the dining-room, where the one all-day fire of the house was burning.

At the end of this time, Uncle Grief, his errand accomplished, his bare fingers clutching the jug in five separate cramps with the cold, was thank-

fully approaching the gate that led up through the lilacs, when a small dancing figure, in a faded green coat rather short for its legs, caught up from behind him, and rushing ahead, wheeled about to inquire rather pertly, "What you doing out here in the snow, Uncle Grief? Where you think you're going?"

"Don't you pester me, chile, wid yo' 'what's' an' yo' 'whar's' in dis wedder. Jes' you trot yo'-se'f by. You knows well dat I ain't gwyin' nowhar. I's don' bin whar's I's gwyin'."

Mrs. Hallonquist sped to the door as she heard Sophie's skip on the gravel.

"Oh, *Sophie*—how thankful I am that you are here safely. Did you get your feet wet?"

"I should say they were," answered Sophie, perching herself like a crane on one leg, in order to turn up the other, and display a damp sole.

"What can you expect when my shoes both have holes in the bottom," she began, dancing a laughing jig on the drugget. "They are chuck full of snow this minute. It's beginning to melt. Ouch,—ouch! and it tickles."

"You say there are holes in those shoes,—those *new* shoes?" cried Mary, aghast. "Why it doesn't seem possible, yet."

"You've got funny ideas of 'yet,'" the child answered saucily. "I've worn 'em for ages and ages,—and I don't want them half-soled this time, I can tell you. I *hate* patched-up things. Don't

none of the other girls wear 'em, now they are getting so big."

Mary made no reply, but in silence held open the dining-room door, while Sophie danced in under the slender black-clad arm, and threw herself down to the rug before a scanty coal fire.

"You ought to see old Uncle Grief's," laughed out Sophie, as she pulled off the first of her shoes. "They are nothing but patches, and one rusty old toe was sticking right out on the snow, like the head of a turtle."

"Sophie! So-phie!" the mother exclaimed sadly. "I can't think where you get this,—this,—lack of kindness. It doesn't seem possible my own little girl could be so cruel,—and I've read you a chapter in the Bible every night and morning of my life."

When the old man returned, Mary went into the kitchen to meet him. "Oh, thank you so much, Uncle Grief," she said sweetly. "Now you sit here in front of the stove, and I'm going to make you a big cup of coffee myself."

"Thank you kinely, Miss Ma'ay," said old Grief, sitting down to the chair she was holding. "Coffee'll tas'e moughty fine, but I knows sumpin' else would tas'e better."

Mary laughed into the twinkling old eyes.

"You shall have it right now," she declared, hurrying back to the dining-room. Tempey, her shoulders heretofore rigidly averted, in the obvious

excuse of making biscuit for dinner, turned to her fond spouse an African smile.

As Tempey was clearing off the dishes, after the four o'clock dinner, Mrs. Hallonquist said, "Tell Grief that the kitchen wood-box must be piled, and he had better get us a soap box of coal as well, and set it out on the back porch. I don't think the scuttles will hold quite enough."

"Dat coal-pile's erbout on its las' laigs, Miss Mary. Grief is tooken his rake to de leavin's."

"I know it. We must have more coal," answered Mary, her troubled expression returning.

The next morning Mrs. Hallonquist rose early. Without waiting for Tempey, Mary wrapped herself close in a certain old scorched dressing-gown, and kneeling in front of the hearth began to make the fire.

At the first leap and glare of the "lightwood," and the answering crackle of coals, the mother glanced quickly about toward the tumbled bronze head on its pillow. No, the little girl had not moved.

Against the old cracked window-shades of dark green, a faint, pinkish glow announced that the storm was over and the day would be sunlit and clear.

Mary pulled up one shade by an inch, and once more looked around at her daughter.

The young face, disclosed by the double reflection of firelight and dawn, lay upturned in the

colours of roses. Mary's heart kindled and leaped like the fire, at the sight of her child's vivid beauty. What a gift it might prove! And alas—what a temptation!

To guide such a being, possessed not only of physical charm, but a spirit already intolerant and self-willed, and neglectful of others, was a charge that at times seemed greater than the mother could bear.

And yet—oh, how lovely! How much sweeter and finer and cleverer her child was than all of the other children!

At the moment, a sound of slow footsteps crunching painfully through the snow, and the ring of an old iron shovel, not being carried, but dragging, as if already too heavy, caused Mary to stoop and peer out. It was old Uncle Grief on his way to clear Sophie's footpath.

She groped her way back to the hearth, and sinking down to her knees by a rocking-chair hung with small garments cried, in desperate pleading, —though in tones carefully muffled that Sophie might not overhear:

“Oh, my Father in heaven—Thou dear friend of the widow and the fatherless—look down on me now—on us both—for dark waters are rising. Help me first with my child. I can't understand her. She seems slipping away from control. She's so different from her father and from me, I don't know how to judge her correctly. When she's cruel

like that—as she was with poor Grief—when she says things so heartless, I just don't know what to think or to do. It may be all my fault for loving not wisely the child which Thou gavest. Perhaps I have placed the gift before the great Giver, but she's all that I have now on earth, and I could not help spoiling her. But I'll be sterner, less indulgent——”

A sound came from the bed. Mary stopped, lifting terrified eyes. The child was beginning to stir from her long night of slumber. The crimson lips parted over teeth dazzlingly white, she gave a low cry, half impatience, half laughter, and then with a quick pettish gesture flung herself around, and snuggled once more to the covers.

“And it is not only in managing Sophie—dear Father,” Mary went on, continuing her prayer when the child remained motionless, “that I make this plea to Thy throne for a wiser and more Christ-like understanding in bringing her up to Thy service—but in the needs for our poor perishing bodies—I am in very sore straits. Two faithful servants as well as my child are dependent entirely upon me. My small worldly possessions are never enough to meet our many demands. All three of them, likewise myself, are in need of new shoes and more winter clothing. I owe Aunt Jemima for milk, and kind Mr. Ham for some groceries. The coal is all out. Help me, Lord, from Thy boundless compassion. Show me how——”

"I'll show you how," cried Sophie, springing down to the floor with a bound. "You say awful long prayers, don't you, Mamma? I always make mine pretty short."

CHAPTER IX

HARD TIMES AND HARDWOOD IN DUNROBIN

WITH Sophie astir, the small room was at once bright with laughter and pretty confusion.

"Oh, what a splendid big fire!" she cried, running toward it. "And my old shoes are dry, even if the holes haven't shrivelled," she exclaimed, lifting one up and thrusting a finger through a worn place.

"You can wear Mother's rubbers this morning," said Mary. "And besides, I am going to write you a note to Miss Theresa that you can take there right after school, and charge you a new pair."

"Goody gout!" triumphed Sophie. "Can I get any kind that I want?"

"I—I—reckon so, but remember, you can have only the one pair and they must do for both Sunday and school."

"Letty's got two," Sophie remarked, with a note of deep envy.

"You say that Letty has *two* pairs of new shoes all at *once*?" the mother interrupted, this one fact having stopped all further attention to her daughter's demands. Mary knew that James

Gaither was about as hard pressed in his business as she, with her half-rationed income.

"Yes, two pairs, and Mildred's got loads of new things," the childish voice rattled on, nothing daunted. "She's got a thousand times more than Letty—but of course she would have. She's old Miss Ossie's pet. I hate Mildred," Sophie cried, switching clear away from a button. "She's so stuck up and fussy, and puts on such ridiculous airs."

With Sophie at school, Mary tidied the bedroom and then sat again by the fire. She was trying once more to solve the sinister problems of bills, taxes and the many demands she foresaw in the near future, when her door was burst in without warning, and Tempey, black, round and excited, boomed in.

"Grief's done took sumpin' *tur-ble*, Miss Mary. He can't draw in his bref widout screamin', an' de fever it's burnin' him up lak a bobby-cue. How we gwinter git holt of a doctor?"

Mary sprang to her feet. "Is he really so ill? Why, of course I will go for the doctor. Run back to him, Tempey. You know what to do in such cases better than I. *Stop*. Get that bottle of brandy from the sideboard. I'll throw on my things in a minute."

In her worn kid shoes, minus the shielding tips, pre-empted by Sophie, and wearing wraps quite

inadequate for the season, Mrs. Hallonquist ran down the walk.

To her great relief, she found Dr. Stepp in his office. The two drove back furiously together, in the doctor's old high-seated buggy.

Tempey, crying aloud, leaned over her balustrade to beckon. The doctor went up the stairs like an athlete. Slowly following the doctor, Mary paused at the wide-open door just in time to hear Tempey sob, "He's a-dyin' now, Doctor. One foot's in de Jordin a'ready. Oh, my ole man, my ole nigger husband,—Gawd hab mercy!"

"Stop that caterwaulin', woman," Dr. Stepp called back sharply, "or you'll push the man over in your Jordin before I've had half a chance to get him away."

It was a long, hard-fought battle to keep the "pneumony" from drawing the last gasp of life from old Grief's meagre body.

Tempey was head-nurse, but Mary was her tireless assistant. Bills were run up to desperate figures. There were medicines, plasters and tonics at Mr. Mayberry's drug store; jellies, wine, tapioca and cornstarch at the grocery; at James Weldon & Co.'s there were two soft blankets bought to replace the quaint odds and ends of old patchwork, half-burned window curtains and a horse cloth that had hitherto covered him.

Sophie gave way to a tempest of anger when told that she could not be given the red coat and hat.

"You can buy all those things for a no-count old nigger man over the kitchen," she stormed, "while your own child is a disgrace. I'm the onliest girl at our school that is wearing her coat for the third year. The sleeves are so short that everybody is making fun of me. I'll stop going to school—that's what I'll do! And nobody can make me, if I say I won't go. I'd be glad if that triflin' old Grief would die dead this minute. But even if he did die," she added, on a long shivering breath of fury, "you'd spend every cent on his funeral, and I wouldn't get anything after all."

Before the horror of this, her child's first open defiance, Mary covered her face. She rocked back and forth without speaking. No healing tears came.

"Oh, my God—oh, my God," her flayed heart was moaning, "must I drink this last cup of agony, too?"

When, three weeks later, the old servant was pronounced "on the mend," Mary Hallonquist faced an immediate crisis of debt.

She must raise money somehow,—and there seemed but one venture possible, which was to try and sell her shares in the shot tower business. They had been bought at par, one hundred dollars paid for each, and to realize on ten of them would make her comfortable for a full year to come.

Mary recounted all of Sophie's statements concerning Letty's new clothes, and the fine things for

Mildred. Surely this must mean that the shot tower industry was improving.

"Yes," she said to herself, much relieved at having reached a final decision, "the very next day when it's fine, I'll take those shares to James Gaither."

There were hours of heart-breaking search in the old Chippendale desk before they were discovered, and then, firmly clutching the age-yellowed envelope in her black-cotton-gloved hand, Mary went into the town.

James chanced to be alone in his office. Surprised and delighted to welcome so rare a visitor, Mr. Gaither sprang up, insisting that Mary take the one comfortable chair, a leathern one, in front of his desk.

Mary shook her fair head until the crêpe folds of her veil all tossed coquettishly. "No," she smiled, "I'm afraid of one that wobbles like that, it might spill me out. I'd prefer this old straight chair. It is safer."

"As you will," he assented.

"I have come here to ask you," said Mary, going at once to the point, "whether now is not a good time to sell out my shares in your business?"

James Gaither looked doubtful, and the corners of his pleasant mouth twitched half humorously. "As a stockholder, and a person enjoying the entire confidence of James Gaither & Co.," he began, "you're entitled to know the full truth."

Mary leaned forward breathlessly.

"Don't look like that, Mary. The facts are unpleasant. That old tower isn't earning the mortar that holds its red bricks together. As an enterprise—that is, as a money-making concern—it simply doesn't exist."

"But," ventured Mary, her eyes wide and troubled, "I had thought—Sophie said——" she paused, stammering.

Gaither laughed. "I begin to catch on. Sophie said Letty was getting a whole lot of pretties? Well, she is, and there are still possibilities, in the old shot tower. Orders come trickling in now and then. But the machinery is rusty and the methods out of date. It needs new blood, young blood, a touch of the infernal Yankee hustle."

"Then where——?" Mary gently reminded him.

"Oh, the money-ease at the moment. The truth is, Mary, Whitlock, who bought up Hallonquist Park, has bought from me a long stretch of river bank just across from Dunrobin. And I can tell you this much, the cash came in pretty handy. Suppose," he suggested, "since I've capital to put in the works, and it's sure to pay better dividends, you let me advance you a few hundreds, taking some of those shares as collateral? I wouldn't advise you to sell, altogether."

"I don't know very much about business," the trouble, deep down in the blue eyes, beginning to lighten a trifle. "But I'm ready to do anything

—yes,—*anything* that you think best. I need money so terribly! Why, James—” she went on, and then paused, as if doubting whether she had the courage to finish, “for the first time in all of my life—I am actually—in *debt*.”

Gaither smiled at her horrified expression. “That is nothing so dreadful. For years debt has been as much a part of my being as the skin on my bones. I’ll be feeling positively nude with all of my liabilities settled.”

Mary laughed a small protest. “Very well, dear James, I’ll be glad to have you advance me as much as you think the shares are worth.”

“You may call for the half of my kingdom,” avowed the gallant James, drawing from his pocket a scarlet cheque-book, the very colour that Sophie’s new coat and hat were to be.

“Oh, not *that* much!” cried Mary, taking him literally.

When this delicate point was adjusted, Mrs. Hallonquist accepted a rather fat cheque, and after thanking him with such pretty vehemence that James longed to embrace her, she hurried home, her spirit as light as the flakes of silvery milkweed sending out its frail sheen to the wind.

One happy year followed another. Sophie grew prettier than ever—but alas, Sophie knew it only too well! There was never an end to the hats, the frocks and the finery she wanted.

The shot tower throve for a while, but soon

fell back to its former condition of barely meeting expenses, and paid interest to its shareholders with a maddening irregularity.

When Sophie was well into her teens, a wave of excitement broke over Dunrobin. On the opposite banks of the Rydal, the "Whitlock Company" of Chicago began setting up a huge modern factory, over the door of which was inscribed in tall gold letters the statement that here was to be the "Whitlock Hardwood Furniture Factory."

But when the first hardwood converted into chairs and tables was provided by the famous old walnuts and beeches of Hallonquist Park, poor Mary's torment was tragic to witness. She blamed herself first, then turned upon Chris, declaring that the whole horror was his fault.

"It's all your fault!" she repeated again and again. "Yours and James Gaither's too,—for forcing me into selling Hallonquist Park. When Sophie is grown up, and knows what you have done, I'm sure she never will forgive either one of you."

That night Chris inscribed in his Memory Book the ensuing reflections:

"Ladies looks at things different from men. They seem to be made without a hitching-post handy. When they feelings are roused, they go prancing and hitting the air like a colt what is stirred up a wasp-nest. It makes you feel kinder pitiful toward them, and not answer back.

Miss Mary's been faulting me forrards and back-

wards all day, because she says it was me who induced her to sell what she calls Sophie's birthright. She don't nowise remember, that hadn't she sold it, she'd be living still in the kitchen without a cottage at all. But it ain't safe to ask a high-spirited lady, to remember a commonsense thing,—not enduring the time she is prancing.

That old park sure has done me one mighty good turn, if never another, for a few days ago, I found at the foot of an oak, a fine type of the smartest spider of all. I calls her Miss Lizzy Lycosa,—the Lycosa being her real name as I found in a book, while I stuck on 'Lizzy' for her christian one.

She is here in my room at this minute, her cunning round ball full of eggs, hitched to one leg so faithful. Every day of her life, she crawles up to my window, sticks her nose todes the floor, and with four of her hind-legs, turns that ball round and round in the sun. till I think the eggs will get dizzy. They oughter hatch soon, and then all the orphin asylum will climb onto her back, like the one that I found with Miss Mary, long ago, at the foot of the rectory fence. Something or other must have come along and et it, for I never could find her again."

CHAPTER X

THE LOOPHOLE

A FEW years after this, on a certain chill evening in autumn, the Gaithers were circled around their big dining-room table, to a meal that was both scanty and poor.

It was Chris, quiet Chris whom few things escaped, who noticed that Miss Ossie was eating nothing.

"What's wrong with you, Sis?" he asked kindly. "You haven't so much as lifted a forkful."

"I'll thank you to attend to your own business, Christopher," she snapped in response.

Ossie's brother went back to silence, as a turtle retires to its shell. "Poor old Sis,—it's the neuralgy like Maw had so long," he was thinking. "If she'd jes' bind it round with a stockin', she'd ease it,—but uc-cose Sis is too citified now for any sech mounting contraptions."

It was Mildred who first dared to speak. "Why didn't you tell me you weren't feeling well, Auntie dear?" she inquired sweetly. "Letty and I would have looked after the dinner, and brought you something nice to your room."

Ossie's rigid lips softened. "I know that you

would, Mildred," she said trying bravely to smile. "You are always so thoughtful." A twinge of fierce pain caught her nerves.

Letty pushed back her chair with a rasp that made Miss Laird shiver. "How can any of us eat this supper?" she exclaimed. "It is regular poor white-trash stuff,—it is—it's hardly fit for the darkies."

"Letty, leave the table at once!" Mr. Gaither cried out. "You're to go to your room, and to remain there until you are ready to offer an apology to your Aunt."

"I was leaving the table anyway," cried the rebellious Letitia. "You're all of you as cross as two sticks."

"Letitia is right," said Miss Ossie, her thin face the colour of wax. "This ain't the food you girls should be eating, or James either. With us mountain folk," she added bitterly, "it don't make much difference—we're usen to worse. But I'm doing the best I can, James," she cried now, as if desperation had given her courage. "You and me has just *got* to talk after dinner. Can you come to the library?"

"Why, surely, my dear," answered James, nervously clearing his throat. "In fact, I was on the point of suggesting a conference. I've a letter——" Here a thin, bloodless hand began to feel about in his pockets. "I received it today. It may prove important."

Miss Ossie squared her shoulders, and marched from the room with the stride of a grenadier.

James glanced up, started, rose and then followed with much less assurance.

As the two reached the small private "den," where the troubled man brooded through most of his evenings, he began: "There's a letter—but won't you sit down?"

Ossie lowered herself into the big cushioned chair which her brother-in-law placed just in front of the fire. Every motion she made was restrained, tense and somehow a menace.

"I've come to the end, James," she told him. "I've used all my own and a lot of poor Christopher's money besides. He don't dream it yet; our account is all in my name. Poor old Chris, he knows he's a fool when it comes to handling money!"

"He is no more stupid than I," Gaither said sorrowfully. "I'm about at the end too—of all things. I am practically a bankrupt," he groaned. "I can't hold it back any longer. We must face ruin, perhaps worse, very soon."

"But Mildred!" gasped Ossie, her eyes frightened and feral, as she saw danger nearing the one being she adored. "She is a young lady now,—with admirers. Three young men have addressed her a'ready. Mildred can't do with less than she has."

"I am afraid that she must,—Letty, too; not to

mention yourself, my kind, faithful sister," the man said, in a tone of despair.

Ossie sat very still, but her mind was a chained thing that struggled and tore at its bondage.

"What was that about a letter?" she stammered at length. "You said it might be important."

"Yes," said James. "I'd forgotten. It's a faint chance indeed. And yet—who can tell," he exclaimed, essaying more lightness, "that it won't turn out to be the proverbial straw!"

"And this ain't the time for neglectin' so much as a straw," Ossie answered, reflecting his galvanized smile.

James fumbled again in his pocket, and finally drew out, with the forceps of two long, thin fingers, the letter in question.

"It is from a connection of mine," he explained, "down in Georgia. The lady is dying, poor soul,—I have never seen her in person,—and she wants me to take her son here and to give him a start in my business." The last statement came with a short bitter laugh. "She hasn't been told, I infer, of my shining success in the tower works."

"Does she say that her son will have any capital to bring you?" Ossie asked very quickly.

"Some thousands, she says. But it wouldn't be right for me to let the young fellow sink it."

"Sink it—fiddlesticks!" bridled Ossie. "With young blood and more money—now's the time to build up. What else does she say?"

"Uhm—um," began James, setting his eyeglasses in place. "'You'll find Karl unusually active and intelligent. I am sure he is a man to succeed. He cares nothing for farming, and I do not blame him. I have told him so much of Dunrobin, and his people there, that the boy is anxious to begin his career in the land where his forefathers lived and commanded respect. My one wish is to get away from this state, where——' Er,—uhm,—well——" floundered the reader, somewhat embarrassed. "The rest is entirely private, merely personal and family details. They would not interest you, I am sure."

His companion was equally sure that they would interest her, and the effort to keep back her curiosity brought her sleeping neuralgia to life.

"I hope it don't mean that the young man's a rascal," she permitted herself to remark.

"Oh no, not at all," parried James. "From the mother's report Karl appears to be quite a model."

"Or that he ain't got any bad blood backing up in his veins," the suffering Ossie pursued.

"His grandmother was my grandfather's sister," stated Gaither, thus ending conjecture.

"Well, this may be the loophole of escape after all," he declared with more spirit. "I think I'll just run up to Mary's, as I'd like to have her opinion."

"Mary who? There happen to be several Marys down here in Dunrobin," his companion remarked

in a dull, suppressed voice which should have warned him.

"Oh, I do beg your pardon, and hers," apologized James. "I should have said Mrs. Hallonquist. But I've known her for so many years, it comes natural to call her just 'Mary.'"

Ossie's face was a flint. At that instant, along the left side toward the fire, the neuralgia dragged a sharp claw.

"Do you think me an out-and-out fool, Brother James?" she demanded. "That you spend words like that on my ear? You know well as me that that simpering woman ain't got no more sense than a kitten!"

"She may not be possessed of the practical sense of *one* lady I know," remarked James, with a bow meant to flatter, but with yearning eyes set on the door.

"Then why do you show her the letter and keep it from me?" Ossie scored.

"Well," stammered Gaither. Then, as a heaven-sent straw whirled in reach at the instant, he added, "she's a shareholder, and being such——"

"Being such," Ossie echoed, "has about as much notion of how you conducts the business as I have of scouring the floor of the moon."

But her brother-in-law had made his escape.

The change from Gaither's turbulent home to the quiet of Mary's small dining-room, with Mary herself before the bright fire, and Sophie's bronze

curls touching the red tablecloth as she bent over her lessons for the morrow, seemed at first a veritable haven of peace.

In deference to Sophie's abstraction, the two adult friends conversed in half-whispers. If their voices were raised, the girl frowned and shook all of her curls as a warning.

James endured it as long as he could, then, being full of his topic, lifted eyebrows of protest, and glancing from mother to daughter, clearly let it be known that he had something private to say.

Mrs. Hallonquist laid her embroidery down to her knees. "Sophie darling," she said, "aren't those lessons of yours nearly finished?"

"No—not half," was the instant rejoinder. "My jommetry's awful tonight."

"Perhaps Uncle James will help you work it out," Mary ventured.

"I'm afraid I can't," answered Mr. Gaither. "It's been many a year since I've used mathematics for anything higher than pay-rolls. I would shrink from exposing my ignorance before such charming company."

Sophie's slim figure, hopefully lifted, slouched once more to the table.

A queer, constrained silence now fell on the motionless group.

Mary took up her needlework, in hands that were not very steady, while James, rearranging his

legs, cleared his throat in the short, nervous way which of late was becoming a habit.

"Sophie," Mary began, in a voice which betrayed something like fear, "you will hurt your eyes over those figures. I am sure it is time to retire."

The girl gave no token of hearing, beyond a sharp kick at the table-leg.

Mary's helpless look returned to her guest.

"See here, Sophie," said James in a fatherly manner, "the fact is, I've come here on business. There's a matter I've got to talk over with your mother, and,—little pitchers,—you know——"


Sophie's eyes flashed. "There's a fire in the kitchen," she said rudely, "I always study my lessons in the dining-room."

"Good Lord, Mary, you hear what she says?" Gaither cried out, taken quite off his guard. "We're to go to the kitchen!"

"Oh, James, you know she is joking," Mary faltered, beginning to tremble. "That's just Sophie's way—she didn't mean it to sound so uncivil."

"Yes, I did!" defied the girl, springing up, "and I'll go to the roachy old kitchen. I suppose I can see when people want to get rid of me."

"Oh, James—James," Mary sobbed, as the angry child flew from the room, banging each door in her fury. "I don't know what to do when that terrible temper is roused."



"We have been through a scene of this kind at my house," James said sympathetically. "Perhaps it's ferment in the new generation. Girls are problems of course—but our lives would be duller without them."

"Oh, you don't *understand*, James," wailed the suffering woman. "This outburst you have witnessed—it's nothing—it's only a hint of what I so often go through. Sophie's rude to the servants,—she seems to love no one,—not even *me*, who would shed my last drop of blood if she needed it. There are times when I believe it will kill me." The stricken soul shuddered in speaking.

"There—don't cry any more, little mother," pleaded the visitor, "it'll all come out right in the wash. Let us try to forget our young Goneril and Regan. Here's a letter I want you to read."

Mary dried her long lashes, and attempted to bite her quivering lips back to firmness.

"Have you any recollection of hearing an old family scandal about my Aunt Emily Gaither?" James inquired, as he drew out the missive.

"Only vaguely. She made some kind of unfortunate marriage, did she not?"

"I should say that she did! She married a German, Mulbach by name, who, during Sherman's march to the sea, sold his cotton to Yankees."

"The details were never told me," Mary said, looking deeply concerned, "though I knew that in some way he had betrayed the Confederacy."

"He was a traitor and a coward through and through to his black German heart. It was not only in selling his cotton when all true sons of the South were making bonfires of their crops, rather than allow them to fall into the hands of our enemies, that he proved false. Not content with huge personal profits, he managed, through trickery, to buy up a lot from his neighbours' stock, on the plea that a ship waited at Savannah, and would run the blockade to England. There was one planter, Wyndham, who began to scent mischief, whereupon Mulbach took out his scoundrel's revenge by dispatching a negro into Sherman's ranks, with information as to Wyndham's concealed stores of cotton."

"What a terrible, *terrible* creature!" faltered Mary. "But surely here in the South he was never allowed to enjoy his ill-gotten gains?"

"He was not!" James said grimly. "But his method of punishment completed his disgrace. He was tarred and feathered, and literally ridden on a fence-rail to the nearest station, where he was kicked aboard the first north-bound train."

"And his wife, your poor Aunt Emily?"

"Never heard from the blackguard again; and I fancy never cared to. But it is all in the letter you hold," he recalled by a glance. "It's from my Aunt Emily's daughter, who was Gretchen Mulbach, and who married a small landowner called

Trenham—a nice chap, I believe. But you will find it all written out there.”

When Mary had finished, there were tears in her eyes never brought there by Sophie.

“Oh, *poor* mother!” she sighed. “What a heart-rending letter! I don’t wonder she wants her one son to come back to his honourable kinsmen. What a *stain*! Has this young Trenham ever been told the whole truth?”

“Cousin Gretchen don’t say so,” mused James, looking down at the letter which Mary that moment returned. “But those few thousands she says he can invest may mean the difference to me of stark ruin, or building a new, paying business. Success would include your shares too, and I know you are straitened as I am. Even more than his money, I need new blood in the tower works, a more modern outlook.”

“Yes, I understand.”

“On the other hand, now, is it right to our friends, or to our daughters,” James laughed lightly, “to welcome a man with such a blot on his name? ‘The sins of the fathers——’” he quoted.

Mary lifted compassionate eyes. “And shows mercy to thousands who love Me and keep My commandments.”

“Then you think we should risk it?” cried Gaither.

Mary smiled at the hope in his tone.

"Yes, dear friend, I believe it was meant that we should do so. And how could a man such as you turn away from the wish of that poor dying woman? Let her know right away that he'll be welcome."

James sprang up. He looked twenty years younger. "Then I'll do it! Oh, Mary, how could I get on without you! I'll walk from here direct to the station, and send a long telegram to Mrs. Trenham tonight."

"Yes, do. And God grant that our decision is a wise one; not only for young Mr. Trenham, but for all the rest of us. Good-night, and God bless you!"

CHAPTER XI

KARL TRENHAM

CHRISTOPHER LAIRD sat alone on the Gaithers' front porch. The house, like the Hallonquist cottage, faced due south; a clear golden sun of October, still high in the afternoon heaven, poured down full upon him. In his hand he held a newly arrived periodical, the title of which, thus displayed, could be seen as *A Journal for Naturalists*.

The tall mountaineer, through long years in the lowlands, had suffered, if not a sea-change, at least a distinct town-change in appearance. His large frame had not grown more stout, but more compact and massive. His head still canted forward, but his shoulders had straightened, and his arms now belonged to his body.

In the matter of worldly attire, he was not utterly lacking in interest, although Ossie dared not yet "give him lief" to purchase his own socks and neckties.

The man's thoughts, however, were not of his clothes nor of himself at that moment, for a wee yellow spider, at the end of a skein quite invisible

to human perception, began slowly to lower itself just in front of Chris's nose.

He drew back, and straightened to watch it, then cautiously held out his palm. Would the creature continue its falling, thus promising largesse of gold to the person whose hand it might touch?

The yellow dot wavered, then seemed to be jerked from above.

"Shucks!" exclaimed Chris. "You just keep on like you started, you rascal. Set right there on my palm, as pleased as a dog on a mat. That means money for me! And the joke of it is," the man chuckled, "I can make a whole lot by just writing a piece about you, little Miss Spider!" He tossed the insect away, and off she sailed through the air like a comet, until her one thread caught the tip of a sycamore branch.

The fact that his writings on spiders, or wasps, or the doings of ants as he saw them, were demanded, and brought him real money from editors "North," was Christopher's great and shining secret. It was something he had not as yet shared even with Miss Mary, though of course he eventually would.

Indeed, but for her he knew he could never have written.

"If I hadn't a-fallen in love, head over heels, the first time I saw her, and *had* to ease up my

mind through my old Memory Book, I never could have written these here articles. Them fool fellows up North, they even like me to spell my words mountain fashion. They're plumb queer."

Chris was reaching out to take up his *Naturalist's Journal*, when the front door flew open and Mildred ran out, laughing a little affectedly, both hands held up to her temples. A young man, Karl Trenham, who had been lunching with the family, now appeared in pursuit. He caught the girl by one slender arm, while his other hand brandished a penknife.

"No, no, Karl, you simply sha'n't cut one of those curls on my forehead. Everybody would notice. But if you won't take 'no' for an answer, there are some at the back of my neck—Oh! oh! there's Uncle Chris!" she exclaimed, her voice dropping, while the sweet face became red as a rose.

"And what of it?" laughed Karl. "I'm sure in his time that your Uncle has cut off a good many curls. How about it there, Uncle Chris?" Trenham merrily challenged.

Chris had caught up his new magazine, and was now intent upon his efforts to hide it.

Karl and Mildred exchanged smiling glances which said, as plainly as words, "Isn't the old boy too funny?"

"If you're going to walk down for your shopping with me, Cousin Mildred," young Trenham

now said to the girl, "you must run up and fling on your hat P.D.Q.—I'm late now at the office, and you know I keep punctual hours."

"Please don't leave me. I won't take a minute," she cried, and sped into the hall and up the long stairway, her small feet drumming a tattoo of haste.

"The usual girl's minute, I fear," remarked Karl, as he strolled toward Chris's end of the porch. "I've yet to meet any woman—and I've met quite a few—with an idea of the value of time."

A low sound came from Chris. It was more like a grunt than anything human.

If Karl heard, he refused to be daunted, for, still waggish and smiling, he continued on his way, until reaching the bench at Chris's elbow, he drew out his cigarette case, struck a match, and then flung himself down in a posture unconsciously graceful.

He now took off his hat, disclosing thick hair the colour of sunlight.

"Yes, these women are queer cattle," Karl went on, as though his companion displayed ardent welcome. "No value of time,—no glimmer of logic,—they are riddles, all right. Haven't you found it the case, Uncle Chris?"

Chris drew out his pipe. He detested the cigarette fumes, and now lit his malodorous brier-root as corrective.

"I ain't much on puzzles, young man," he said

slowly. "I reckon I'm apt to take things as I find them. It's a beautiful day that we're having—look at those sailing white clouds!"

Karl refused to look up.

"I was talking of women," he persisted. "They interest me more than clouds. Down home there in Georgia—I'd caught on to the sex pretty well, but I'm not so sure of myself in Dunrobin. I find the girls rather standoffish—all, that is," he corrected, while a smile played in his slightly closed eyes, "but my charming cousin Mildred."

Receiving no encouragement, he appealed: "Now, come, Uncle Chris, be a clever old boy, and hand a few tips to a fellow. You've red blood in your veins, and this jolly old world is one big circus."

"No, I haven't red blood," said Chris rather quickly. "Not in that way you mean. And I'll tell you right now, Mr. Trenham, you're barking up the wrong tree. I don't talk about ladies with no one—not even with friends."

The meaning implied in his last words could not be avoided.

"Oh, come now, Mr. Laird, that's a little bit rough," Trenham cried, a bright spot springing out on each cheek. "I meant no offence. It's only my free off-handed manner of speaking."

"There may be some as likes it," said Chris, "but I'm not of their number. It's safer to have such things known at the start."

"That's right, rub it in," muttered Karl, with a half chagrined, partly humorous twitch of his full crimson lips. "I won't trespass again. Oh, thank Heaven," he cried, springing up and cramming on his hat, "there's Mildred!"

It was Mildred. The pretty thing paused on the doorsill, to throw arch glances around at her cousin. Chris saw it all from the tail of one eye.

Just behind his young niece followed "Sis." Miss Ossie stood, her lean, toil-worn hands folded neatly together, just above where her stomach would be, if she had one; her eyes shining with pride, turned from one youthful face to the other.

Karl sent a quick smile to his hostess, which seemed to declare "yes, she is lovely," and then stepping up to the girl, caught her forearm, town-fashion, and led her out into the street.

"Don't they make just a too elegant couple?" Sis asked with a rapturous sigh.

Chris turned half way around in his chair, and set sombre eyes on the two.

"I always did love a blond man," murmured Miss Laird, her smile now becoming quite fatuous. "And 'specially when he is tall, and holds his head high, and his shoulders so stiff and so manly."

"If he tries to r'ar back any manlier," said Chris, "he will topple plumb over, and bust that flat back to his head."

Miss Ossie's smile died—a quick death—in convulsions. She wheeled around to her brother.

"It ain't like you, Chris Laird," she accused, "to take up a prejudice such as you have taken, from the first, against young Mr. Trenham. Oh, you can't deceive *me!*" she denounced, although Chris had attempted no denial. "You took it the minute you seen—er—saw him, and the poor boy always so friendly and cordial to you."

"He is that," answered Chris with a groan, "and I wish to my God that he wasn't."

"I'll declare, Christopher Laird," Miss Ossie began after a short ruthless march to his chair, her eyes pinning him down like two spikelets. "Sometimes I have reason to think that you ain't kept the sense you was born with. It warn't much at the first,—but it seems to have petered to nothing! I'd be ashamed, plumb clear through, to confess to this ugly mean spirit. Air you jealous of Karl that you act so outrageous about him?"

"No, Sis, I ain't jealous," rose Chris's voice, very meek and subdued, "but I don't like the he-critter's walk—his hips wiggle—and he's going to be fat in the weskit some day—sure's an old hog gets rusty."

"Tsch!" cried Miss Ossie in scorn. "I've been watching this man,—I've made James tell me all he is done in the shot tower works,—the year and few months he is been here. He is a genius in business—as sure as that you and James Gaither is muddlers. He must be kept right here in our

family and I'm doing my best every day for to make up a match between him and our Mildred!"

Chris's face was stern. "You are taking a lot on yourself, Sis, to force it," he said slowly. "It ain't no business of yours, and the handling of other folk's lives shouldn't oughter be done by mere humans. You'll rue it, I fear. Yes, you'll rue it."

"I'll rue what?" Ossie flared. "Will I rue wedding Leezer's own child to the likeliest man in Dunrobin? To settle her rich—in a house of her own—and maybe her carriage and pair! Why, Mildred's father, *he* wants it!"

"Did he say so himself?" threw in Chris, with such swiftness that Ossie was taken off guard.

"Well, not exactly," she floundered. "Not in so many words. But of course he must want it, if he's got any sense whatsoever."

"But he hasn't,—he's a muddler like me," Chris reminded.

Ossie was compelled to draw back, and begin on a new flanking movement.

"Everybody that knows Karl is crazy about him," she asserted. "There's a kind word for each and all, and he's *so* witty! The men can't get over his smartness in business. That half dead old shot tower is booming, actually booming. Orders come in so fast that they've doubled the number of workmen——"

"And kicked out old Anthony Blum, what's been

book-keeping there on half wages, ever since the surrender," remarked Chris.

"And what if he has been discharged, his eyesight was failing! Karl said so," defended Miss Ossie. "You must prune out the old rotten wood to let the young branches grow vigorous."

"Yes, I heard him say both of them things," murmured Chris rather sadly. "But it don't help old Anthony none. He've a bed-ridden wife, an' five childun——"

With a low cry of impatience, Miss Ossie was turning away, when Chris caught at her hand. The brother and sister both flushed, for such personal contact was rare.

"Now, Sis, look a-here," the man said gently, "we two is got no call to wrangle, and spend harsh words,—one on the other. You know I love Mildred,—and I want her to marry the likeliest man she can get."

Silence having fallen, he went on very softly, "Milly must be a wife and mother. If she don't, she is going to be like a lonesome, one knitting needle, no good at all without its mate. And it ain't going to matter so much, who she marries,—so long as he's all real man. Do you know, Sis," he ventured, being greatly encouraged by Ossie's more kindly expression, "I sometimes wish that our niece could have known 'Lonzo Thigpen."

"'Lonzo Thigpen!" gasped Ossie, and turned bluish green in her horror. "That loose-jointed hill-

billy,—that skinner of beasts and their innards, —that oaf! Air ye plumb bereft, Christopher Laird! Let me get in the house, before I take up a billet of wood, and ruin ye!”

Left alone, Chris sat a long while musing, then slowly pulled himself upright. “I must be moseying too,” he muttered. “At this rate of loafing I’ll be fired from my job, like old Anthony Blum.”

CHAPTER XII

THE ICY HEART

THE first black frost of the season had been scheduled for the previous night in Dunrobin.

But the frost did not come. In its stead, a chill piercing damp held the earth, and next morning grey clouds, like huge sponges, exuded, in place of absorbing, the moisture.

Out in the kitchen of the Hallonquist cottage Aunt Tempey sat close to her stove. Now and then she looked around it to Grief, closely glued to the opposite surface.

"Miss Mary an' dat spilted chile Sophie mus' be sleepin' dar haid off dis mawnin'," the former observed in a tone of extreme disapprobation. "My biscuits is done riz an' fell two times a'ready. Dey'll be tougher dan Judas Iscaragut if dey rises an' falls any mo'."

The complainer was draped in a mantua of ancient design, rusty black, with bedraggled bead fringes. From her round huddled shoulders it fell in the curves artists give to the folds of marble cloth on the urn of a tombstone.

"'Clar to Gawd, Honey Grief," she continued,

having received a quick grunt of sympathy, "but dis chill is bit down to de heart of my marrer. All de bones I's got is drumsticks wid ice in de middle."

"Dey ain't no mo' friz up dan mine," Old Grief chattered. "I was settin' here studyin', jes' now, dat de hebbently land whar we's goin' mus' be one long endurin' July, wid de streets of Jerusalem pilted high to de roofs wid big ripe watermillions——"

"An' shoes on our foots—wid no corns, an' us clothed wid de bres-plate of glory—Dar's de bell rung at las'"—Tempey broke off her chanting to announce. "Well, it's time an' to spare! Here, you loafin' black nigger, jes' you hop fum dat stool, an' ketch holt er dat pan o' hot biscuits."

Sophie sulked during the meal. She knew from the chill that lurked through the house in spite of three fires, that she needed to wear her old last winter's coat, and felt a dull anger toward her mother who had postponed the purchase of the new and greatly desired garment.

"If you had done what you said," the daughter flared out, "and had bought one of those heavy ones at Weldon's last week, you wouldn't be asking me now, to go off looking like one of the girls from the Church Home, or the County Poor-house!"

"You shall have the coat you want, Sophie dear—I'll give you my word. But you *must* put on the

old one before you go out in this penetrating cold."

"All right then. This once only—remember! And what's this for?" she caustically inquired, as Mary, after holding the coat for her daughter to get in it, rather timidly extended a small book with a tan coloured paper cover, denoting that it came from the Dunrobin library.

"It's a novel I've just finished," said Mary, attempting a light, casual tone. "Your school is so close to Miss Sally's,—I know you won't mind stepping around and returning it for me."

"And bringing another one home, I suppose," demanded Sophie, with a twitch of the shoulders.

"Never mind," said her mother, laying it down to the table. "I prefer to return it myself."

Sophie snatched up the volume. "You know I will take it," she cried, "though I've got a whole cartload of schoolbooks to carry already. What I can't understand," she declared, marching past like an offended empress, "is how you can spend so much time reading those silly novels."

There was nothing for Mary to say.

"I never have wasted my time on such trash, and I never intend to begin," was the girl's parting thrust.

Sophie's querulous mood seemed to follow her into the schoolroom, and when at last, dispersal bell rang, Sophie curtly refused Letty's offer to walk half-way home, gathered up her now hated

textbooks, and flinging the yet more abhorred novel on top, started around to the library.

Miss Sally beamed over her desk. "I'm so glad you came by this morning, Sophie dear," she cried to that sombre young person. "I was hoping either you or your dear Mother would chance to drop in. How is Mary today?"

"She's all right," answered Sophie. "Here's her book, and she says please to send her——"

"Yes, of course, I've been keeping a special one hid in my desk," the little librarian interrupted eagerly. "It came only yesterday, straight from the publisher here. It's Miss Jernigan's latest and best—'The Icy Heart.' Oh, it's *lovely*! Doesn't the very title enchant you?"

Sophie, frowning and shifting her books, got out something about being in a hurry.

"You impatient young things always are!" laughed Miss Sally archly. "Well, take it right along, I won't even stop to slip on the cover; give your dear Mother my love, and tell her I envy her the real treat she has in store. I sat up most of last night to find out what was going to happen! It's the sort of romance you just can't put down, when once you have read the first chapter. How Miss Jernigan *does* it!" she sighed in an ecstasy.

Sophie caught at the book rather rudely, and fled to the street.

"Of all boring idiots!" the angry girl cried to herself. "To giggle and roll up her eyes, and

actually blush over somebody else's love-story. I suppose it's because she's a withered old maid, and never had one of her own."

She was passing the Bannister home, where an ancient box-hedge stuffed with cobwebs rose a little beyond and within a stone coping, when a redbird flew down from a tree, and perched on a shrub before her. In contrast with the grey of the sky, and the malachite green of the hedgerow, he seemed a spirit set free,—like the core of a love that is deathless.

"Oh, you beauty, you darling!" said the girl under her breath.

The bird twitched his crest, cocked one eye toward the intruder, while the imbricate down on his throat began slowly to quiver.

"He is going to sing!" Sophie exclaimed, when a bang and a clatter of books to the earth changed the song to a red flash of terror.

Sophie ground out a few inarticulate words through set teeth, and stooped for the volumes. The last one she picked up was the novel, which lay open, face downward. On its back shone the title in gold, "The Icy Heart," by Annabel Jernigan, the words being set in a gilt outline displaying that human organ.

The schoolbooks were hastily flung to the coping, while with a scowl of distaste the "Heart" was snatched up and its soiled pages hastily dusted off.

"What in the world will Miss Sally say," Sophie

was thinking, when a line caught her eyes, and instantly held them:

“‘You have admitted in more ways than one, how you loved me,’ whispered Arthur. ‘I have seen it tremble on those proud scarlet lips, and love-lights have played in your beautiful eyes. And yet—oh, most cruel, most lovely of women——’

‘And yet,’ Beatrice echoed, sending toward him a glance of seduction and coquetry.

‘You have held me away from that red mouth’s allure,—you have toyed with my heart—but your moment has come for surrender. No, you cannot escape me this time,—I will win you and hold you forever!’

Seizing her by both of her fluttering hands, in a grasp so intense that it pained her, Arthur drew the girl close to his breast.

Beatrice strove to resist, but was powerless in those conquering arms. She was captured at last, overcome, utterly hypnotized by love’s passion.

Closer—closer—his masterful face—now dead white, now flaming with triumph—made its way to her own. Their lips clung—the girl’s fragile form shivered——”

“Pooh!” Sophie cried, and shut the book. “It’s disgusting!”

“What’s disgusting, if I may make so bold as to inquire?” said a low, laughing voice in her ear.

Sophie gasped. For one terrified instant she thought the speaker was “Arthur.”

“Oh, oh, Mr. Karl—Mr. Trenham, how you

scared me!" she stammered. "How horrid of you to sneak up and not let me hear you."

"I hadn't the first thought of sneaking," defended the man rather hotly. "I was walking this way. I had business. It was you with your head in that book, who couldn't hear a plain citizen coming, and I want to see for myself what made you so blind and so deaf to the world."

"I won't let you," cried Sophie, holding it behind her. "It's a novel. I hate such sentimental trash!"

"You appeared to," the other said dryly. "Stop, no good backing into the hedge, you'll only get dirty. When I set myself out for a thing I usually get it. Like this——"he exclaimed, and with a swiftness that took his companion off guard, he twirled her about by the shoulders, caught the book, and holding it up well above her reach, let his merry blue eyes seek out "Arthur."

"Ha! So here is the place," the tormentor began. "I can tell by the crumpled-up page. 'Closer—closer—his masterful face—now dead white, now——'"

With the goad of frenzy, Sophie sprang for the arm in the air, swung upon it, and again brought "The Icy Heart" to earth.

"I won't hear it! *I won't!*" she panted. "It's silly,—it's perfectly loathsome!"

"Now dead white,—and now spotted with purple," Karl recited aloud, his eyes set, as if

fixed on a book firmly poised in the ether before him, "and their lips met. Smack! Smack! — Hully Gee! the fair lady cried out, but that's bully, friend Arthur. Come back, and we'll try it again!"

"I won't listen!" stormed Sophie, her hands to her ears, "and you ought to be 'shamed, Mr. Karl — to talk such things to me!"

"Does that mean you'd prefer demonstration to speech?" Trenham inquired without lifting his voice. Oddly enough, Sophie heard him. She ventured a shy, upward glance, and met eyes spilling laughter.

"I should say that I didn't!" she snapped angrily. "You are indecent! I wish you'd go and attend to that business you spoke of. Don't you dare say another such word to me."

"All right then. Let's be moseying on, as your Uncle Chris says. But here, hand me those books. They must be heavy."

"I'll carry my own books," Sophie said ungraciously. "I do it twice every day. But if you insist (this with a withering glance) on walking home with me, I would thank you to take that— thing."

Karl stooped for the wiry gold heart, and began a new dusting of its injured pages. "Poor innocent booklet," he murmured, while Sophie switched farther away. "Just because you are telling her of things that make life most worth the living! Never mind, little heart," he apostrophized, with a

hand now caressing its covers. "Miss Hallonquist jeers at you today, but wait till her time comes for loving and kissing. Just wait, little book, till some masterful face, green and yellow, and mottled with passion, begins closing down on her own—when their lips meet——"

"Oh,—oh,—oh!" the girl raged, quite beside herself with fury. "You *must* stop it! I'm in earnest. If you don't, I'll begin to scream out loud, till the people all come running out of their houses. You may think you are funny—but you're not. I hate you—so *there!*"

A break in the clear vibrant voice, that was usually filled with music, warned the jester that chaffing had gone far enough.

"Of course I thought you knew I was teasing, my dear little Sophie," Trenham quickly capitulated. "But the truth is, you looked so confounded pretty when your big eyes began flashing fire, and your cheeks burned like poppies—I couldn't resist. It's the first time we two have ever been together, alone. You're a winner, you know. Please forgive me."

"No! I can't and I won't," was her answer.

"I've been a brute—a big brute," the man pleaded contritely. "See here, Sophie, I'll do anything on this earth to show I am sorry. I'll eat dirt—I'll sit here on the curbing and howl."

His companion turned one resentful shoulder upon him.

"But I've this much to say as an excuse," Trenham continued. "I believe in that love you're pretending to scorn. I believe, with my whole soul—in kissing. And you will too some day. No, don't toss those brown curls, for your time is coming. And what is more," pursued the voice of the charmer, "when you are grown, you are going to be just the kind that will set men crazy. All the fellows are saying that you are the brightest and prettiest girl in Dunrobin. If I were one of the boys, instead of the sober old business man that you see me—and, by George!" he broke out, with a new and thrilling tone in the speaking, "I don't believe I am too old to fall head over heels in love with you here where we're standing!"

Sophie's stride almost grew to a run, and the blood in her veins turned to fire. Her chief thought was to prevent Karl from seeing the astounding effect his impetuous words had produced.

He took several long steps, and, reaching her side, evinced his intention to govern his paces by her own.

"You are sure you're not feeling a little bit human by now?"

Her head shook a violent negation.

"Then," said Karl, in accents of defeat, "I reckon I've got to wait until you really have grown up, till you start reading novels—which I think will be pretty soon now.

"Yes, you'll be at it soon," he declared, with a

glance at her quivering profile, "and they'll help you to learn that the best thing of all is just—love—and that love brings on kisses, as springtime brings flowers—and bad colds. Don't that eloquence move you?"

"Not a bit, you thick-headed bungler," the rueful young man made reply to himself. "And you soundly deserve it. Well, we're here at your gate. You won't urge me to enter? Of course not! Then good-bye—but at least, just to keep me from going away with my fists in my eyes, and my golden head covered with ashes—let's shake hands."

The crimson and tremulous face was still shyly averted. After what appeared to Karl as a short, intense struggle, the girl shifted her books to her left arm, and extended, at an angle behind her, the hand that was free.

The man grasped it in both of his own,—“The Icy Heart” having fallen to the curbing, and began a slow, meaning pressure.

“Don't do that!” Sophie whispered in a strangled voice.

Trenham held it the more firmly. A peculiar tingling sensation, not unlike that produced by a volt of electricity took possession of Sophie's right arm. It crept to her shoulder and spread upward in a hot scarlet flame, to her throat. In a frenzy she tugged at her fingers—repeating, “Please stop, Mr. Karl!”

“Say first—you forgive me.”

"Never—never!"

"Then," said he very gravely, as one who had come with reluctance to a certain dark need, "I fear I'll be driven to kiss you."

At this, the young figure whirled around.

"Just you *try!*" she defied him. So swift was the impetuous turn, that her hand was wrenched free. She stooped for the silly red-backed novel, and before Karl could catch her, had started upon the long path to the house, like a fawn that dogs were pursuing.

Half way up, while still fleeing, she threw a gay laughing glance backward.

Karl had already gone from the place, leaving the small gate ajar, looking pathetically foolish and empty.

Sophie stood very still for a moment, then continued her way in a dream.

CHAPTER XIII

CHRIS TRIES TO TELL HIS SECRET

NEXT morning, it was a transformed and radiant Sophie who went forth in the sunshine to school.

In dressing, she had put on her best gown, that was vastly becoming; and when Mary faintly demurred, her daughter gave as a reason that this was Mildred Gaither's birthday, and, as Letty's boon friend, she Sophie, had been asked to the special dinner.

"Is it to be a big party, or only home-folks?" the mother now asked.

"Only me and that Trenham man, I believe," was the answer, in a voice that was consciously airy. Sophie's long talk with Karl had of course not been mentioned. "That's another," she said, as she thrust on her red Tam o' Shanter, "that Miss Ossie is crazy about—and I have an idea Milly is, too."

Mary started. "Not crazy about young Mr. *Trenham*?" she queried, in a low, half-frightened tone.

"And suppose that she is?" Sophie challenged,

her cheeks flaming scarlet. "Lots of people think that he's awfully handsome."

"That is not it," Mary said in the same troubled way. "But there can *never* be anything but friendship, a cousinly friendship, between them."

Sophie stared, then brightened with smiles. "I guess you are right, Mother dear. After all, they really are cousins."

Later in the same afternoon, Mary built up the dining-room fire, and settled herself for what she supposed at least two further hours of waiting. Almost immediately, a step on the gravel outside caused the worker to lift her sleek head.

It was surely a man. Not James Gaither, for the tread was too solid. "It is old Chris!" Mary smiled, speaking under her breath.

"Had a party down our way. I left it!" announced the visitor superfluously, when the usual greetings were over.

"And came right here to me," Mary continued the statement, "because you were afraid I was lonely. Dear old Chris. You are always so thoughtful."

"Don't you praise me too much, till you hear the facts," Chris rejoined, looking faintly embarrassed. "It's plumb true that I knew you was lonesome, and it's one reason I came. But there is something——"

"You haven't yet told me a *word* of the birthday

dinner," Mary put in hastily. "Did dear Mildred enjoy it?"

"Look here, Miss Mary," the man protested, "I didn't slip off from the rest, and come here, to spend words on parties. I had something to say—something special." He paused, moving uneasily. "It's about my own self—my private and personal business. I've been aiming to tell it you long."

Mary, spreading the pink cloth she was embroidering on her knee, regarded a half-finished bit of her work with absorption.

"To tell me? Why, how nice," she remarked abstractedly. Yes, that rose was a wee trifle smaller than the rest. She must go around the edges once more.

"You see, someways, Miss Mary," the man hobbled forward, "the telling is your due. But for you and that old Memory Book what you made me begin——"

Mary's thoughts dropped the rose. "That *I* made you," she smiled looking pleased and astonished. "Why, *Chris*, I have never until now, even heard that you had one."

"Maybe not," he conceded. "That don't alter the facts. I began it the first evening I met you——"

"Out in Aunt Baring's yard, near the fence," Mary caught up the theme.

"Yes," said Chris, "I had fell so in love, in a manner, that I had to write it or burst."

"Oh," cried Mrs. Hallonquist, the flush on her cheek matching his. "That belongs to the long, long past. How happy we were then—how ignorant of sorrows. Now to think we are just two sober middle-aged *friends*. But at least we are glad of our friendship, are we *not*?" she threw in with a comforting glance, and an emphasis under the "friend."

"Ye-e-es," the man replied. "But, the time's come to tell you. It is right I should do it, and the telling is got to be now."

He had turned partly about in his armchair. His restless deportment, a something determined and vaguely excited that showed in his face, gave Mary her first touch of warning.

She caught up a needle, and began to measure off in the air a length of embroidery cotton. Chris paused for a moment to watch her. How slender, and pointed and waxen the small fingers were!

"Yes," he went on more gently, "it ain't often I get such a chance—only the two of us drawed up like this, warm and cosy, in front of your fire. Most frequent when I'm here, that daughter of yours is whirling the house around her head like a big watchman's rattle. Well, Miss Mary, you'll sure be astounded, I reckon——"

So far, he had pushed on, when once more embarrassment gripped him. "I'm a wee bit afraid, now I've worked myself up to the point of reveal-

ing my secret, you'll be cross because I didn't tell you sooner."

Mary set grave eyes upon him. There was something behind all of this prelude, and mysterious parrying, intended to convey a deep sense of importance. But what in the world could poor Chris really know or divulge that could bring her a shock of surprise?

As she gazed, thus revolving her own thoughts, and only vaguely aware of the object on which her regard seemed so fixed, Chris sank slowly down into the depths of his chair. Now he lifted one hand and drove back, like a harrow, through his thick, nondescript hair. The effect was alarming. Chris bristled.

Mary's sensations were those of a mouse in a trap. "Would you care," she asked quickly, "if I finished threading this needle before you begin?"

"No," Chris said, though his whole soul protested, and in the queer silence that followed, he began cracking the joints of his fingers.

Mary jabbed with the thread at her needle, but it passed every time. Perhaps the bright eye was winking. Her friend endured it as long as he could, then wheeled about in the firelight.

"Ain't that dad-burned young needle threaded yet?" he cried. "Here, you give her to me."

He held forth steady hands. Those of the woman were each one shaking in a separate ague.

"Never mind, I don't think I care to keep on

with the work. Oh, *dear* Chris—*dear, dear* friend," Mary pleaded. "Are you sure that it is better to speak?"

Chris's mouth opened. "Of course I'm sure. That is all that brought me. If I don't say it now, it'll stay stuck in my gullet forever. No, it's got to come out. What I'm praying my Maker right now," he went on more than half to himself, "is whatever you say or you do, you won't laugh when I tell you."

Mary could have wept. Poor old Chris—poor faithful and hopeless adorer. How could even he think it a secret! Why, all Dunrobin knew how entirely he loved her.

"You are *perfectly* sure," she faltered, "that you must tell me *now*? Oh, dear Chris,—can't you see what you're doing?"

It was the man's turn to stare. What on earth could be ailing Miss Mary? He had not given her a clue, not a hint of his secret, and here she was white as a ghost, her eyes black with fear. Chris was fully aware of how little he knew about women.

He shook his big, tousled head. Already he felt himself balked, if not wholly defeated. "Perhaps you air right in them words," he said dully. "Maybe I am a fool to believe you would care, just because I am caring. It's made so much difference to me—all the difference between being a lonesome, dumb critter, and a man with a light in his heart. But don't think I'm faulting you,

Miss Mary. I ought to have known it was nothing you wanted to hear. I'm faulting myself for my being conceited enough to think you ever could want it," he stopped short, with a crestfallen air.

Mary swallowed a lump in her throat. "Oh Chris—my dear faithful comrade and friend," she said sadly, "can't you see there is no question of 'faulting'? I am *honoured* and *proud* when I think of the thing you would tell me. I'd be less than a woman if I did not feel honoured and proud. Yet I say again, Chris—as if I were really your own loving sister, don't hurt us both, dear, by declaring it. As a fact," here she smiled, and tried to give a small playful shake of the head—at which two shining tears fell on Sophie's pink linen, and spread into wafers of brown, "I already know what you're trying to tell me. I have known it for years."

"You have *known* it!" cried he, in blank wonder. "Why you couldn't, Miss Mary, not hardly. It didn't begin in my life till more than two years ago. And it's been done so quiet—all through letters—No, you couldn't," he stated with complete conviction. "It's been kept all in myself. There wasn't no way in which you or nobody else could even suspicion."

Mrs. Hallonquist's under lids straightened. She repeated these words to herself, and then asked of that stunned person, "Did my ears hear correctly? Am I losing my senses?"

"No, don't go, Chris!" she pleaded, as she saw the great frame begin to lift itself from the chair. "I am stupid. All along, I've been thinking you meant—something else. I see my mistake. *Please* go on with what you were saying."

It was Chris who now looked puzzled. "You were thinking I meant something else?" he repeated.

Mary waved a vehement gesture. "Never mind, —don't try to think what it was,—just one of my own silly fancies. *Please*, dear Chris, *please* keep on. I *do* want so to hear it."

"I'm mistrustful about keeping on," he said gently, though his brows were still frowning. "I have already seen that you wouldn't care much for my secret."

"But I would—and I *do*!" cried out Mary disturbed and trembling. "I want to be told almost more than I ever wanted a thing in my life. Doesn't *that* convince you?"

"Ye-e-s," Chris replied, "and it's mighty plumb sweet in you for to keep on insisting, but it seems kinder small pickings now, after all of this beating around the bushes—and it's right fair to warn you, Miss Mary, that when you are told it won't mean as much to your mind, as one jar of your famous peach jelly."

"I'll risk that," Mary bantered, and tried to speak archly. "Now begin, dear old friend," she encouraged.

Chris sighed. All the savour had gone from his disclosure.

"As I already hinted," he said rather tonelessly, "it began about two years a-gone."

"Two whole years!" his companion repeated, the protest beyond her control. "And you're telling me *now*,—not till now!"

She bit her lips sharply together, and her small head went high in the air; while before her, Chris's shaggy poll began sinking, as if on the opposite end of a see-saw.

"Never mind," she put in quickly, "forgive me this time for the interruption. I won't do it again."

"It was two year a-gone," said the man, again seating himself at the loom of narration, "at a time when my life didn't seem much worth the living."

"Oh, Chris!" Mary bewailed, forgetting her promise of only an instant before, "how can you *say* such a thing, while remembering our beautiful friendship! It has been so much to *me*,—my strength and my comfort. In fact, Chris," here the voice was reverently lowered, "I have thought it an affection quite *sacred*."

"Oh, it's sacred all right," Chris lightly conceded, being somewhat on edge with the incessant breaks in his tale, "but it didn't appear—in a manner—to fill all the nooks and the crannies a fellow is bound to conceal."

"And—and—this new thing that's come to you,"

Mary faltered, "does it make your life more worth the living?"

"You can reckon!" cried he. "And the funniest part of it all is that it was done just through letters!" A thump on his proud, swelling chest, evoked a sharp crackle of papers.

"All—through—*letters!*" the dazed woman echoed. "Then this is the reason you've been able to keep the great secret from all of your friends?"

"To be sure," Chris acceded. "And I totes them around with my going. Every letter is here," he announced, as his hand moved up toward his breast pocket.

He stared now into the fire, his face taking on the shy, sheepish look of a boy caught too late for redress in some fruitful brigandage. The hand over the pocket that rested against his heart, moved softly, and then lay quiescent, as one touches a thing love has brought.

CHAPTER XIV

MISS LIZZY LYCOSA

THE silence that now filled the room seemed to Mary's blurred vision a quivering, palpable mist. Chris's large frame wavered through it, and appeared as a throbbing balloon about to float up from its moorings.

She caught at the sides of her chair, and pressed hard to its stiff oaken back, until her spine was as moveless and rigid.

For the first time in all of her sensitive life, she was feeling the lash of self-scorn; and was tasting the hyssop and myrrh of bruised pride.

The woman across from Chris Laird, now recalled—as one presses a thorn—all of the fatuous pity she had given. Here, beside her own hearth, during the half hour just passed, she had been fighting a duel of phrases, in order to keep her visitor at bay. She had been praying in snatches, and striving to find tender, merciful words in which to reject him! And all of this time her good friend—no longer a suppliant lover—had been trying to tell her that his heart now belonged to another, to a woman of whom Mary had never heard.

She longed to cry out to herself, "Oh, you foolish and blind, let the earth rise and cover you!" but instead, she sat on like a thing carved in wood.

Through her chaos, the shrewd voice of vanity pleaded, "At least keep it from him. He must never suspect this abasement."

"I—I—I'm so taken aback, dear old Chris," she got out at last, "that you won't be surprised if I can't find the words that I need,—all at once to express my feelings."

"Take all the time that you care for, Miss Mary. I'm a slow hand at speaking myself."

At this pleasant and casual tone, Mary's visual focus cleared. She fixed her eyes upon him, as though she had never really seen this old comrade before.

He was lounging at ease, one hand still on his letters, the other swung down toward the floor. His profile, which as usual canted forward a little, was gilded by flickering firelight.

She saw sweetness, strength, honesty, truth—the clean soul of the lad from the mountains shining out in the face of the man, like the sun through tall trees.

Again self-respect nudged her. She could not keep silent forever. She must drive her maimed senses from out of their corner, and beat about for conventional phrases in which to assure the old friend of her joy in his joy.

Yet why, since he was only a friend, should she

feel that her whole house of life was beginning to crumble?

"I'm so glad for your sake, I congratulate you most heartily," Mary heard her own high-pitched voice now declaring, "but I *am* so surprised!"

"I don't handily see how you can be surprised," Chris rejoined with a slight smile, "since you don't know it yet, in a manner."

"Not in *actual* words," Mary parried, "but of course, from your looks, from those *letters*!" Here she lifted arch brows, and shook a raised finger, which, indeed, required no further volition in shaking. "So—out with it all. And remember, no more naughty secrets."

"No more secrets," Chris amiably echoed. "But what is the matter, Miss Mary? Why air you shivering so fierce, air you puny?"

"Why, certainly *not*!" she cried, with a laugh so queer and unnatural, that Chris swivelled round in his chair.

"Yes, you air," he insisted. "You're ailing. Let me fetch you some water."

Mary allowed him to go into the pantry, and was grateful indeed for the cool, bracing draught.

"Now I'm quite myself again," she assured him, "and I won't wait another half-minute to be told."

"Prick your ears then," said Chris, "for it's coming. It begun with the day I first found my Miss Lizzy Lycosa."

"Miss Ly-co-sa," shrilled his listener, striving

hard for composure. "I don't know the name. It can't be Virginian. Where on earth did you happen to find her?"

"On the edge of your Hallonquist Park, just before Whitlock's men began to cut timber," Chris replied in a commonplace way.

"What's her birthplace—the town she came from?" Mary parried, and at the moment was wondering how long she could keep up the strain.

"Why, how do I know? I can't very well ask her," said Chris. Then he laughed. "I presume that I could,—but you can reckon the answer she'd give me."

"What a very queer person," thought Mary. "She's Northern, of course, one of those active and large-booted females, who stride like a man. She had doubtless been scouring Dunrobin for miles about, while here on a visit, and in that way Chris must have met her."

"And you have grown to care very much?" she questioned him next, in words slightly disjointed and shaken.

"My Miss Lizzy's a pippin," he answered. "All my luck's come from the minute I saw her. I went home and wrote. But first, I put it all down in my Memory Book like I have told you,—then I wrote it out plain on a pad——"

"You wanted to keep those first precious impressions of meeting," said Mary, achieving the

hint of a smile. "Just as,—so long ago,—you wrote about *me* in the garden?"

"That same way," nodded Chris. "You see, from the instant I spied her, I knew she was different, somehow."

"Of course," got out his companion, ice gathering about her heart.

"And I studied her cute little ways, and her smartness. You can hear me! She wasn't any too pleased at my spying," chuckled the man, looking knowing and sly. "But I couldn't go 'way, in a manner. Not after I saw that pretty white ball banging round from one ankle."

"What!" shrieked Mary, but Chris, now intent on his subject, jogged placidly on.

"In my writing, I aimed first, to describe her exactly, putting down every point as I saw it. I described how her beady eyes glittered, and how she ruffled that heavy black fur on her sides——"

"Chris Laird! You are demented!—or I am," gasped Mary, for the chandelier over the table had begun to spin round like a top. "*Please* say all of that over again, and a little more slowly,—I don't seem to take in——"

Just then a loud noise was heard on the porch, and a moment later Sophie burst into the room followed by Letty.

"We—we—*ran!*" panted the former, for both girls were entirely out of breath. "Letty's to stay here with me for the night, Mother. We will sleep

in the trunk-room. A bed's there, and we'll spread our own covers," she declared, in response to a sound of dismay from Mrs. Hallonquist.

"Hello, Uncle Chris," the excited young voice rattled on. "So it's here where you came to.

"Come on, Lett," Sophie cried, wheeling out from the firelit circle. "We've got to go hunting for covers, and make up our bed. Mother, where do you keep the old blankets?"

"I can see I'm not wanted," said Chris with a humorous smile. "Well, good-night, Miss Mary."

"Must you go right away, Chris? I wanted,——" his hostess began, then seeing that both girls had paused, and were listening, held her hand for farewell. "Good-bye, if you must leave us. But please come soon again, very soon. I'll expect you."

As the visitor left the house, both young creatures broke forth into violent giggles. There was no reason for their mirth, except the sheer joy of being together, yet Mary flushed painfully, and as the two girls left the room, she sank down, white and trembling, with scarcely enough of vitality left for a prayer.

Meanwhile, Chris plodded soberly home. He was glad to be out in the air, and took off his hat to the night's coolness. Now and then, he would run a large hand through his hair.

"It's a puzzling world," he announced to the cold stars above him, undeterred by the thought

that the same speech had been made to each heavenly twinkler in turn, "and the puzzlin'est critters it breeds, air the ladies."

Not until his small den was reached, the gas lighted, and his thick Memory Book spread invitingly open, did the man make any further attempt to unravel the intimate snarls of his meditations.

"Miss Mary was different tonight, [he inscribed], from what I ever have known her. I always had hoped she would be tickled to hear of my writing. It has brought lots of fun to my life. I'm sure I'd be mighty much pleased if a happiness like this had come to Miss Mary. But women are funny when their minds get upset.

There was more than one time in our talking, when I'd begun to get het up in speech, that I'd have to draw rein because Miss Mary was acting so curious. She would make out to laugh, and the very next minute, she would draw herself up and look scary, as if I was going to smite her. I have never smit anything yet, and I wouldn't begin on Miss Mary. It has got my head going around like a wheel on a pivot, withouten any way for to make the dad-burned whirligig stop.

I had took up, [here he paused, extracted a penknife, and erasing the bastard word 'took,' carefully printed in 'taken'], a copy of the first magazine where my writings appeared. My name was all printed big and fine on the outside—'Miss Lizzy Lycosa. A Study. By Christopher Laird.'

I always thought that title looked splendid, but I never came anywhere near to display it this evening, for just as Miss Mary smoothed down, and began firing questions about Lizzy and the queer looks and ways of this special spider, the two girls rushed in like young catamounts making for cover.

I moseyed. There warn't no use of trying to stay in those circumstances. For when Sophie is near, Miss Mary, she don't listen to God, or man or beast—but only to Sophie. She is being eaten up by that daughter, as is also the case with a new kind of spider I recently found. Yes, that blasted old mother, when her young ones are hatched, crawls up to the sun in my window, and she is sitting there yet, inviting and urging her children to come and help themselves to her portions. I am sure that she likes it, she acts so at peace and contented. There are human mothers like her, and I am afraid that Miss Mary is one such.

I have made up my mind that the new piece I write for that Editor Man, what makes life a burden with asking, will be a piece with the name of it 'Mothers.' I'll study Miss Mary some more, and my spider.

Miss Mary is showing her age, but she is still sweet and comely. There is never to be another on earth for old Chris Laird, though I am thankful to say, with this writing, the misery of loving that I once suffered, is passed into dear friendship—like a kettle of syrup, with the fuzz and the scum all skimmed off. I wish, now I started, that I had been able to finish telling Miss Mary, for I don't believe I'm ever to try it again, nohow. She acted too funny."

CHAPTER XV

THE QUEST OF THE ROSE

THAT night, after learning Chris's secret, or, rather, after having so tragically missed his true meaning, Mrs. Hallonquist suffered through hours of sleepless and barren conjecture.

To add to her morbid, fantastic condition of mind, Mary chanced to be one of those timid beings who dread, above all other things, to sleep quite alone.

She was frightened and cold. From the trunk-room was heard an incessant ripple and murmur of happy young voices, broken now and then by a half smothered outburst of giggles.

Mary hoped from her soul that the chatter would keep up until daybreak. She shrank from the thought of the night's sinister silence which at any hour now, might descend upon the cottage. She hated the thought of being left alone with those mocking and stinging reflections which wheeled through the room like grey bats.

Dear old Chris was in love—her own Chris—her humble adorer. How splendid and massive he had looked sitting there in front of her fire.

It was strange that, until this last evening, Mary

Hallonquist had never happened to notice how pleasant and firm were his features, nor how the slow humorous smile lit them up, like the growing of a clear dawn on a hilltop.

To a woman who loved him—Miss Lizzy Lycosa, for instance—not, of course to a mere sisterly friend—Chris might seem really handsome.

“Oh, I’m glad he’s happy at last. Dear Father in heaven,—make my old friend very, very happy,” she whispered, and then suddenly flung about to stifle queer sounds in her pillow.

Toward morning, the girls fell asleep. Mary instantly rose, lit the gas and began to read her Bible.

At breakfast, the young things were cross, a natural result from their innocent orgy of wakefulness. Mary bided her time, and then, seeing a reasonable chance to introduce the question, said to Letty, “I hear that Uncle Chris has become quite a writer.”

“Yes,” replied Letty, “he’s eternally locked up in that old room of his, and when you peep at him through the window, he’s always writing. We don’t know who to, but he gets lots of letters.”

“And you haven’t an *idea* whom he corresponds with?” asked Mary. “How strange! I should think he would tell you.”

“Not old Uncle Kiss,” Letty laughed. “He’s as sly as a fox when it comes to minding his own business. We’ve just begged him to tell us. When

a new letter comes, he grabs it like *this*,"—Letty demonstrated the act on a muffin,—“and he goes around the house all day long so silly and smiling that we nearly die. Milly says,” she went on, noting how intently her hostess listened, “that he’s got a girl somewhere up North,—nothing else, Milly says, could explain it.”

“It sounds possible,” Mrs. Hallonquist answered, producing the farce of a smile, and allowing the brown stream of coffee which, at the moment she chanced to be pouring, to dash merrily over the edge of the cup to the table.

Sophie, perceiving this token of agitation, gave a light, scornful laugh. “Look out, Letty,” she warned. “You might hurt Mother’s feelings. Everybody in town used to think that Uncle Chris was crazy about her.”

“Sophie! Don’t be so *vulgar*!” cried Mary, a very sharp edge in her usually gentle voice.

The two friends exchanged glances.

“It is too absurd, to think of Uncle Kiss bothering himself about any kind of a sweetheart,” Letty remarked, with an air of dismissing the subject. “All he cares for on earth are those bugs he has up in his room.”

Later, when the two grumbling, protesting young things had started to school, Mary, like a manikin working in a dream, went through the usual process of tidying her chamber. She made her bed, then went into the trunk-room, to throw back the covers

under which the gigglers had slept. Her whole being was heavy and lethargic, dragged down—so she thought—for the want of normal rest.

When Tempey appeared, to demand in her gruffest of tones, "What you thinkin' we kin have fer dinner an' supper?" and her mistress caught sight of the turban of menacing red, Mary made up her mind on the instant to get from the house.

"I'll just step down to Weldon's," she said to herself, when the domestic contentions were over, "and buy Sophie that striped flannel jacket she's been begging me to get her for an age. Let me see," the mother pondered, a thoughtful look stealing into her blue eyes, "now what *was* the colour she wanted? Was it red or brown? I believe Weldon has them in all of the new shades. No, it is blue, to match her new sailor hat."

On her way to the gate, Mary espied a pale rose flushed like the dawn, and as fragrant. After a moment's hesitation, she gathered the flower and pinned it close to her throat. "If I *should* meet old Chris," she was thinking, "I'll not let him go, until I've found out *every word* about that strange person he's going to marry."

But alas, though Mary and the rose happened, with fluttering pulses, to pass, more than once, by the door of the office of Page & Youngblood, Insurance and Real Estate Dealers, Dunrobin, no Chris was to be seen.

Mary's one promise of personal pleasure was a

long and intimate chat with her friend, Sally Finger.

"Is Miss Ossie Laird as much of a reader as ever?" was the first query that the visitor launched.

When informed that Miss Laird browsed more in the realm of biography, travel and history, than in the mushroom-starred fields of new fiction, Mary ventured, in a tone still more lightly indifferent, "And her brother—my dear old friend Chris—does *he* ever come here to the library?"

"Yes, right often," Miss Sally replied quickly, and, under the questioner's eyes, seemed to take on a hint of self-consciousness.

"He is here after the Encyclopædia Britannica, and the few works we have on biology and natural history. Did you ever see any one improve," she cried out, as if impulse had proved over-strong for discretion, "as Mr. Laird has been doing of late? He reminds me, in looks, of splendid old Darwin, only younger, of course, and much handsomer. Really, Mary," the speaker declared, now coy and indubitably blushing, "when that young man looks around in the big way he has, and begins that attractive, slow smiling—why——"

"Well, I must say good-bye," was Mary's brief rejoinder. "Thanks for finding me another nice novel. I must hurry home, I am late now."

On her return journey, Mrs. Hallonquist's path was not strewn with roses.

"Could it possibly be Sally Finger—that plain old maid? No—" the answer came at once, bringing a queer sense of escape from a horror—"Chris said it was all done through letters—and there's no need of his writing to Miss Sally."

At the first step on the porch as the day wore on, Mary ran to the door. "I've been down to Weldon's, Sophie dear, and have bought you the jacket you wanted," hurrying to speak, before the daughter could do more than meet her mother's bright look with a scowl.

The sombre eyes lightened. "Oh, how jolly! I'm ever so much obliged. I wanted to wear it this very evening. I hope you remembered that I told you to get the stripes *brown*."

Through the tense strain of dinner, Mary sat without speaking a word. Tempey puffed in and out, with her red crest of warning, while old Grief, in the yard, could be heard sawing wood.

As Sophie's last mouthful was finished, she threw down her spoon and announced, "I suppose I might as well take that old thing back, and be through with it. I won't wear blue stripes."

"Very well, if you are *bent* upon it," Mary responded in a martyred voice, "but, I'd advise you to change that crumpled and dirty gingham you have on for a clean one. I see you've been spilling more ink."

It had been Sophie's intention to change, but her mother's suggestion, and the weary, resigned tone

in which it was spoken, roused in the girl something perverse, almost hostile. She caught at the skirt, held it out for inspection, and then stated, "No, I'm going down just exactly as I am. What do I care who sees me?"

As Mary made no further comment, her daughter demanded rudely, "Where is that horrible jacket you bought? Have you tied up the bundle again?"

"If you want it tied up you can do it yourself," Mrs. Hallonquist said quietly, and taking a book, prepared to seat herself near the fire.

Sophie gasped. Was this really her mother? Or, had she, the indulged and intractable daughter, gone, for once, a little too far?

The paper in which the parcel had come, having been crushed into a vibrating ball, now lay on the hearth. Swooping down upon it, and without searching for the twine, Sophie wrapped the jacket at random, and flew from the house.

For a while anger drove her along, but within sight of the Gaither's front gate her swift pace lessened, and at the same moment, she jerked with a vicious impatience at her now sagging bundle. The movement loosened one long sleeve, that fell from its place, and was soon flapping about Sophie's knees, occasionally striking one of her ankles. Her hat had slipped over one eye, and the splashes of ink on her skirt seemed to spread with each flutter of the untidy gingham.

Rapid strides ensued in an effort to reach the

Weldon store, and the corner of the Gaither's iron fence was reached, when the front door opened wide, and two smart, well-groomed figures emerged, arm in arm.

The speeder stopped short. It was Karl, and an elaborately dressed Mildred. Her immaculate gloves held aloft an expensive sunshade, white, and veiled with ruffles of blue chiffon.

Even thus, on the horrified instant, Sophie saw that the young man's companion had never looked more attractive.

She knew where they were going. The Whitlock's big Northern-built house had at last been completed. The great oaks and beeches of Hallonquist Park threw a rich shade down upon the wide porte-cochère, and on the railless verandahs of the stately building. The proud owners were giving the first formal afternoon reception that Dunrobin had ever known.

"Of course Karl would be going," Sophie bitterly recognized. "The Whitlocks are rich and influential."

But why need he bend down like that, peering far under the sunshade,—and beam as though it concealed all delight?

With a fresh start of alarm, the girl knew they were turning her way. How could she face Mildred in so shabby and bedraggled a condition! The one clear and passionate thought Sophie was able to harbour was a means of escape from the two

blithe creatures slowly advancing. She stepped into the street, and was crossing obliquely, when the parasol swung well aside, and Mildred, pink, radiant and smiling, perceived her.

Sophie literally ducked, in her desperate efforts to avoid detection. She could hear Mildred whisper to Karl, at which he broke forth into fresh merriment. Of course they were laughing at her, at her ink-spot, her hat on one ear, her soiled shoes and the dangling sleeve of the blue-striped jacket.

The way of the transgressor is hard—and it should be. Sophie waited in vain for a word—some casual phrase to show that, at least, they pretended not to have noted her wretched confusion. But no greetings came.

“Nasty simpering *cat!*” Sophie hissed. “She is making him snub me. He would never do it alone by himself, and she knows it right well. I won’t forgive Mildred for this—not ever—ever—not as long as I live!”

If Sophie had left her home storming impatience, she returned to it a mute image of woe. The jacket, in spite of its brown stripes was not even unfolded.

Muttering something by way of an excuse, the unhappy girl crept to the trunk-room, and searching about until she found a key to its one door, she locked herself into its shelter, and refused to emerge.

After this, one day followed another—a dreary, cowed procession of time, bearing sinister gifts,

alike to Mary and her daughter. New mists of reserve were constantly rising, with half-revealed inhibitions, twanging nerves, quick, brusque contradictions, and sarcastic arraignments that sprang up like the torch of a match in the dark, to die out again as swiftly.

The very marked alteration in her mother's looks and bearing, became clearer to Sophie each moment that the two were together. What the girl could not guess—for this the older woman concealed as her Spartan fox of personal torment—was the fact that her mother, who seemed to young eyes so far past the green purlieu of romance, was devoured by the same sort of passion that was consuming Sophie, and was gnawed by one dull, reiterant question, "Why does Chris stay away?"

CHAPTER XVI

WHAT LETTY WROTE AT SCHOOL

A WHOLE week had gone by, seven long days, filled for Mary with fruitless and dolorous brooding.

As for Sophie, her integral tragedy had two results, one to keep her at home, out of possible sight or of encounter with Karl Trenham; the second, to fling her pell-mell, with all of youth's vivid abandon, into reading every novel she was able to borrow from Letty, or to abstract from her Mother's scanty hoard.

"St. Elmo's" enthralling pages felt the warmth and the salt of her tears. When "Jane Eyre" was discovered, she could scarcely sleep because of the emotions aroused. She would lie half awake and half dreaming, to live over again in her excited brain, that frantic, extravagant glory of flame, that had set its mark on her young being. Again, the girl felt the frenzy, the wild exultation, the will to be a part of the bright fury, as she strained out of nurse Tempey's arms, demanding in her childish treble, "Tate me back to de fire. It's pritty! Oh, I want to do back!"

It was on the eighth of March, after a night when the wind seemed a sentient thing big with evil that Sophie started off in the storm. She was wrapped in her shaggy brown school-coat, exactly the colour of her eyes, and on her head there was stuck her scarlet Tam o' Shanter.

The wind was still high, though the gusts were less frequent, as she turned in at the Rectory wing, where Aunt Baring held her school.

An aged clock had just given its brief hysterical warning, that in one more thirty-seconds, it would begin to strike a reverberant "nine," when the last pupil hurried along the main aisle to her desk, to find Letty already seated.

"Oh, *So-phie!*" the latter exclaimed—if one can exclaim in a whisper, "I've got something *too* killing to tell you!——"

The wall timepiece began its loud strokes, and, just as it finished, Mrs. Baring called out, "Young ladies—your school-hours have begun."

"Shucks!" grumbled Sophie, well under her breath, and flaunted her gingham skirts sidewise to denote her impatience.

"Mean old thing,—she knew I was dying——" Letty muttered, when the name "Letitia Gaither!" and a sharp, meaning rap on the desk compelled scowling silence.

The two young things sat waiting their chance for disclosures, but never had Aunt Baring's eye been quite so relentless.

Seeing all hope of whispering was over, Letty pushed up the half of her desk, and feeling about for a pencil and a scrap of paper, began to write hurriedly.

"Letitia Gaither!" the voice came again, and this time with the ring of battle. "Kindly lower your desk and sit upright."

Sophie bent far over her Latin. The paper was safe in her hand, though until Aunt Baring's suspicions subsided she would not dare risk exposure by reading the words.

By being both cautious and sly, she finally managed to get the white scrap to the top of the desk, and then into the pages of her book. She knew that Letty was watching her over the back of a battered Geometry, her eyes a-glitter with laughter.

Sophie read, "I'll simply explode if I don't manage to tell you. It's about Cousin Karl and old Mildred. He kissed her last night. I'm sure they're in love, and maybe they were getting engaged. I am sure Milly's in love—for I heard her say——"

Suddenly laying her flat palm on the burning words, Sophie sat staring down at the back of the hand which concealed them. Her first definite thought was, that she had misread Letty's note—it was all an impish mistake, no such words had been written. She could hear her companion struggling to hold back her mirth.

A few weeks earlier, she would surely have joined in Letty's giggles, and thought it an excellent joke. What had wrought so great a difference?

The schoolroom hummed round her ears like a hive of inconsequent bees, filling cells, not with honey, but kisses. The word caught and clung as a gossamer veil among brambles. From her past hours of gorging on novels, every aspect of kissing, —rapturous, despairing, forbidden, renouncing,—the kiss long and tender, and, most of all, that queer nightmare, kissing in fiction, where hot lips meet and cling, as if never again to be parted; each and every variety of the embrace, was re-read and re-lived in her over-stressed brain, and each vision enhanced her excitement.

A last sweep of storm tried the windows. They rattled and strained to the potent, invisible force. Sophie put one hand up to her throat, terrified by the thought that she might swoon. The other she managed to lift well up over her head.

"What is it *now*, Sophie?" her teacher inquired rather tartly.

"May—may I come and tell you? I can't speak it loud," said the girl in a tone that made Aunt Baring push up her glasses, and look down at her pupil with something resembling alarm.

"Why, of course. What's the matter? You have grown very pale," she remarked, as Sophie achieved the high rostrum.

"I'm not well. I must get to the air, Auntie

Baring. I'm afraid if I stay in this room, I am going to faint."

"I'll excuse you at once, my dear child. What on earth could have caused the attack? The room is well ventilated. If you are feeling so ill, I think I should send one of the other girls with you."

"Oh, *no*,—*no*," Sophie pleaded. "I want to be to myself. Please don't make any one go. I'll be all right just the minute I get outside in the wind."

Mrs. Baring did not seem convinced, but giving her no time for further objections, Sophie ran to her desk.

At Letty's excited inquiry, beginning, "What on earth——" The other flared back, "Oh, you hush. It's all right. I know what I'm doing!"

Letty looked greatly hurt, at which, on the instant, Sophie felt deep contrition. A lump rose in her throat. Her terror of fainting was over, but what she feared now, was bursting into sobs before she could get to the street. She dared not speak kindly to her comrade, knowing well that the tempest would break—so assuring herself that she would make it all up with her best friend on the morrow, she fled through the door into freedom.

CHAPTER XVII

SOPHIE WALKS THE FENCE

SOPHIE'S brief flight from the schoolroom door was successfully accomplished. Yet upon the outer steps, distended sobs were still in the slender throat.

A few quick, shuddering breaths escaped, and these, snatched from her lips by an elfish current, changed to torn bits of sound.

Freedom confronted her—wide, longed-for freedom—with limitless horizons and a vast dome of blue.

The suburbs were soon gained. Here for the most part clustered negro dwellings, each set on mother earth in angles all its own, but beyond these shanties Sophie fared on a path which led—though she had taken it unconsciously—out over the nearest hill and straight down to the river's edge, and the Gaither shot tower works.

Once on the slope, the wayfarer swung along rapidly and, in a few moments more, discovered herself within a sunken road between high banks, the upper, incurving edges, fringed with aerial roots.

The wind had left the lower plane, but overhead among the pines, and the bare branches of

deciduous trees, it roared with a curiously distant sound.

Sophie threw back her head and stared at the frenzied torment of the lashed boughs. She felt it a part of her own miserable excitement.

But why? What business, after all, was it of hers if a young man, Karl Trenham, kissed Mildred Gaither?

"I'm out of my senses; I must be going crazy. That's what's the matter!" she cried aloud. "What is it to me, and what can I do about it, even if he does love Mildred? Me! I'm nothing but a schoolgirl, with my fool hair all hanging down my back!"

She jerked the crimson Tam o' Shanter quite away, and flung defiantly, in the wind's peering face, those hated masses of bronze curls.

A few dead leaves from last year scuttled sideways along the road. "Kiss—kiss—kiss," each one whispered in its fantastic flight.

"If only," Sophie lamented, "I had never read those novels! If only he had not walked home with me that day! I won't think! I won't picture what it means!" she added fiercely, and with these impassioned words, fled up the hill, as if demons were pursuing—and they were.

Without another pause, she reached the edge of a little clearing, one of those lonely, odd patches of mountain corn, enclosed in a zigzag fence; but otherwise seeming to bear no relation to humanity.

She stared across it, thinking that the place looked like a shrivelled scar. The ground was rough with spikes of last autumn's stubble, but the old fence was softened, in its whole length, by the clustered, ghostly similitude of summer's lush, various growths: iron-weed, its summits touched with purple; diaphanous, silvery plumes of golden-rod, sumac, and down among the stems, bracken, and wiry billows of dry grass.

Sophie moved slowly forward, knee-deep in crackling ferns. "I'm going to walk this fence rail," she declared. "I haven't tried for ages, and here there is nobody to see me if I fall off. I wonder if I can?"

She sprang up, holding by one of the spraddling, x-shaped uprights which, planted in the earth, crossed at each jointing of the level rails.

Once mounted, she began to measure the space to the next upright cross-piece with a wary eye. It seemed to be drawing outward, like a rubber band.

"Here goes, and whatever happens, at least it will keep me from thinking!" declaimed the valiant tight-rope walker, and took one short wavering step. She balanced carefully, her young arms outstretched, the graceful lines of her body taut and indrawn with effort.

So utterly engrossed was the acrobat in her venture, that she failed to see a man who, now emerging from the wood at the far end of the stub-

ble-patch, stopped short, drew back, pursed his red lips for a whistle of inaudible delight—then deliberately crouched deep among the bracken.

Her first lap passed, the rail-walker grew more courageous. Three lengths had been traversed—then the fourth—finally the fifth. Karl crouched still lower, though his head was lifted. The girl's ankles were quite perfect.

She was skimming toward him light as a swallow. The round cheeks beneath the red cap were vivid. What a glowing, bird-like, exquisitely unfettered creature she appeared, her wings wide-spread, her face grave yet triumphant—all ignorant of snares and lurking fowlers. What a joke it would be to frighten and then to catch her! How the bronze-brown eyes would blaze!

Trenham bided his time to the second. Sophie was just within an inch of closing her hand on the last upright prong, when he sprang out from cover. "Booh!" he cried sharply, as if to a little child.

She gave a low scream, toppled, balanced, and then plunged toward the road and into Karl's outstretched arms.

For a few heart-beats Sophie lay on the man's breast. He was silent—then he began to laugh.

The girl drew back, sent one incredulous, black look to his merry face, and instantly attempted to escape. He held her close.

"You let me go, Mr. Trenham! You let me go this minute!"

"Not on your life," laughed the other. "Why, I've only just now caught you."

"You mustn't keep me this—this—way," she protested, her clear voice rising to an angry wail. "You know it's wrong. Undo your arms. I'd rather,—rather——" she cried shrilly, a phrase from a recent novel flitting aptly to her brain, "have the coils of a serpent about me."

"Oh, you would—would you!" mocked the still grinning Karl. "That's a nice little bokay for me! I'll tell you now, young lady, you've got to talk prettier than this to get away."

"Oh, oh," raged Sophie, "if I were a man—I'd kill you where you stand!"

"Oh, oh," derided her companion. "And if you were a man, do you think I'd want to hold you—or be getting ready for a kiss—as I'm now doing?"

"If—if you do *that*—what you just said," the frenzied prisoner panted, "I'm going to try to kill you, even though I'm only a girl. I've got no father and no brother, so I'll defend myself."

Karl suddenly released her. "Good Lord! I thought you knew I meant it all in fun," he said contritely. "Why, you queer kid, you pretty spit-fire you. I honestly believe," he paused to stare into her wrathful face, "you meant that threat in earnest!"

She sent him a storm-swept glance, and then began to retreat, step by step, until she felt the old fence at her back.

Trenham, on the contrary, standing where he was, drew out a cigarette case, conspicuously new. It had been given him a few weeks before, on his twenty-sixth birthday, by his cousin Mildred—and so memorially inscribed.

Sophie's wide, brilliant eyes watched every gesture. With his feet well apart, and his hat on the back of his head, the case was now clicked open. The man carefully selected one white tube, thrust the square gleam of silver to an inner pocket, and began to feel for a match.

As he found one, the rough wind, which, for a long while had been dormant, hurried excitedly toward him. This meant skill in lighting.

Sophie, with the same tense gaze, watched his hands, brown but smooth as those of a woman, the round closing of scarlet-red lips where the cigarette was met, and the muscles on satiny cheek and chin as he drew swift breaths to coax the wan flame he shielded. To her lovesick and inexperienced eyes the process was singularly masculine, deft and altogether thrilling.

That short, quick pressure to his heart, her agony of fear mingled with blazing rapture at the threatened kiss, her anguish when she realized that he was laughing, all of these emotions had thrown Sophie's secret bare to her own blinded inner vision. She knew now that she loved this man—loved one who was, perhaps, Mildred Gaither's lover.

Of course to him she could only be, as yet, a silly child. Nor had she hope that one so desirable as Karl would wait for her growing up.

Extreme youth plunges swiftly to its full measure of despair. It revels wretchedly in its condition of abandonment to woe. Thus it became with Sophie. After the flash of revelation, showing her bound for life in ties of hapless love to the unconscious Karl, she accepted almost eagerly an existence foredoomed to lonely disappointment, and the thought brought a dark sort of calm—

When Trenham looked out from the haze of a long, satisfying exhalation of blue smoke, and chaffingly remarked, "How does it come about, young miss, that you are at large on a schoolday?" she was able to give the instantaneous reply, "And how does it chance, old sir, that your nose is not as usual in your office desk?"

Karl laughed appreciatively. "That's one into me, but so neatly thrust I don't begrudge it. Honestly though, Sophie—or shall it be Miss Hal-lonquist?—I am curious to know why you are not at school."

Before the uncomfortable memories this simple question raised, the girl's whole aspect altered.

"I—it—was nothing," she faltered, her head hung down. "Only I wasn't well. I nearly fainted, and then Auntie Baring let me come out to the air."

"That's queer. I wonder a little that your

mother sent you to school when you were feeling sick."

"She didn't!" Sophie flared, for, notwithstanding her own filial shortcomings, she was always swift to defend her absent mother. "I was as well as you are standing there this minute, until I got to Auntie Baring's and Letty wrote something——"

The impetuous flow of words had carried her too far. She stopped on a little gasp. Horror was added to an expression already disconcerted.

Throwing away his cigarette, the smoker caught at the latent suggestion of intrigue.

"Letty wrote something—something that had the power to make you ill at once?" he asked, or rather mentioned to himself, for his words were deliberate and thoughtful.

Sophie's skirts lashed the air in a torment. "Don't try to think it!" she flew out at him. "I won't let you think."

"How can you help it?" he demanded. Then as there was not, nor could be, any answer, he stepped a little closer and inquired, "Was it about me she wrote?"

"I'm going! I won't stay here to be tortured another minute more!" she cried in sharp decisiveness.

As she rushed past him, Trenham caught a brown-clad arm. He wheeled her about, a trifle roughly, and stared down into the quivering face, as though he had never looked on it before.

"Tell me at once what it was Letty wrote you."

"Nothing can make me!" said the shivering Sophie.

"Am I to tell you, then?" he asked in a gripping voice.

CHAPTER XVIII

WHIRLPOOLS

BEFORE that terrifying question, "Shall I tell you, then?" Sophie paled. She made toward speech, but the words would not come. Her whole face was a fluctuant tide of emotion. The sight of her virgin distress made Karl bolder.

"Well, here goes. The ridiculous thing Letty wrote, and which has upset you, was about 'yours truly, Karl Gaither Trenham.' Very much at your service," and he bowed exaggeratedly.

"You are joking again. Oh, *how* I wish—how I do *wish* I was dead!" In speaking she had backed far away, and now hurled herself down at full length into the dry autumn growth by the roadside.

The man's gaze dwelt on the slight, shaken figure. He noted the immature yet graceful curves of her young body. "Pshaw!" he said to himself, "she is an innocent baby. But she certainly grips a chap hard. Besides," he thought, frowning, "her people are poor as church-mice, and I came up here to get on. Nothing doing!"

The wind, all at once, seemed to wake to his craven reflections. It slapped his cheeks hard, then

leaned back among the mammoth tree-cushions, a very Falstaff of early March gales.

Karl held his felt hat in its place, and was about to turn toward the town, when he fancied a cry rose from the bracken. With a shrug of reluctance he strode a few paces nearer. Sophie's red cap had caught on a briar, and now dangled in air, like a signal of warning.

Trenham kicked it aside and knelt by the motionless form.

"Look here, Sophie," he said in a tone as devoid of sentiment as that of an auctioneer, "this silly old stuff can't continue forever. You sit up like a nice child, and I'll take you back into Dunrobin."

A petulant twitch was his answer.

Trenham sighed. He was thinking, just then, what the damp soil was going to do to the knees of his trousers.

As she failed to give further, he urged rather wearily, "Oh, come now—I've had quite enough. You don't have to keep lying there like a fence-post. Anyhow, your stockings are showing——"

This stung the prone figure to action. She turned and sat up in a single lithe movement, and furiously pushed at her dress skirt to make it conceal her long legs.

"You're indecent!" she flared. "You're a pig—and simply disgusting!"

"Fine! Keep it up! You pitch into Big Brother Karl just as hard as you've a mind to. He don't

care, not a wiggle. His shoulders are broad, and anything that will drag you out of this ditch where you're wallowing."

With the words he stood up, and ignoring her fierce "I'm not wallowing at all," stretched eager hands—"Yupp-tee-doo—one—two—*three*; and now on your feet like a lady! That's all right. Now stand still, and Big Brother will put on your cap."

The bronze curls were bent in ironic meekness, at which Karl essayed the return of the Tam into place—a process resembling the fitting of a white leathern top to the stopper of a perfume bottle.

"That's fine as far as it goes," he declared with a beaming and elderly smile. But you got your face dirty while wal—er—beg your pardon—reclining there on the ground. Stand still a minute till I get the worst off on my hanky."

He drew forth that spotless white object, and, with lips slightly pursed, in the manner of aged tailors when threading their needles, set to work on his self-imposed task.

Sophie's left cheek alone had been sullied. There were small discolourations where a twig or torn scrap of a leaf had pressed into the flower-like texture, while, meandering down through the stains, ran small brooklets of still glistening tears.

Now it chanced that this schoolgirl's left eye was, if anything, just a thought larger and deeper and more brimmed with romance and mischief, than

had ever been its brown mate, and, also, near the left of the lovely curved lips, was the smallest and roundest of dimples. As Karl soberly plied his new trade, the treacherous dimple kept sinking, then rising again to the surface, like a rose in a hurrying stream.

"At last!" the odd nurse-maid exclaimed, stepping back to appraise the performance. "I believe I've scraped most of the real estate off. Now we'll trot down home to the city."

"Thank you so much," breathed Sophie with honeyed composure. "It's been ages since any one washed my face for me like that. Perhaps *some day*," she glinted, "I'll be able to do the same for you."

"Don't bother," said her companion, with such swiftness that she knew her arrow had struck. Indeed, it had rankled, for after a short, scowling pause he flung out, "You young minx! The fact is you never should have been turned loose from the nursery. A great girl like you, who can still be a silly cry-baby!"

He had her with this, but she refused to give in.

"So you think that I act like a baby?" she questioned, then deliberately stood and let scorn fill her sails. "Well, I can tell you one thing, Mr. Karl—Gaither—Trenham, nobody ever can make me cry—but—you!"

"None but me! I am highly honoured."

"No, you're not, you are sneering," said Solphie.

"All the same it's the truth. Why, you can't even pass me by on the street without a smile and a look that goads me! And today, with those big-brother airs——"

The flurry of anger was sped, and he saw that the red mouth was shaking.

"Well, we've spent breath enough on this jawing. Let's go home, kid," said Karl, and reached for the brown elbow nearest. For an instant her shoulder had swayed and rested against him. She twitched it a fraction higher along his rough coat sleeve, and cried, "I am nearly as tall as you. Look where my shoulder is reaching?"

"Oh, I say now," the young man threw down from his superior height. "I could eat my soup flat off of your head. And, besides, you are standing on your tiptoes. Naughty! Naughty! That's no fair, a-cheatin'!"

"Maybe I am on my toes," she admitted; "but you can't say I'm not a whole half-a-head taller than your dear, darling Mildred!"

Trenham stared. "Than my dear, darling Mildred," he echoed, as one who is doubting his ears. "Look-a-here, what has Mildred to do with these fits you've been throwing?"

"Nothing—nothing!" she hurriedly disclaimed, then cancelled denial by adding with vicious intensity, the four words, "How I *hate* her!"

"My good Lord!" Karl murmured, his eyes narrowing. "There's more here than appears on the

surface. Why on earth, you queer child, should you hate my gentle, kind cousin?"

"You *kissed* her," said Sophie. "You *kissed* her!" The words had shot forth before the girl realized the full force of all they admitted. When she did, as if in hopeless surrender she muttered, "That was what Letty wrote me at school."

Trenham's lips gave one dry, humorous twist and were instantly steadied. "And what's it to you, may I ask, if I kiss my own cousin?"

Sophie swallowed a lump in her throat. "But it wasn't because she's your cousin. You're in love with each other—Letty said so. She says Mildred is crazy about you," the wretched young voice stumbled on. "Cousin James is your cousin, and a step nearer, but I don't know that you ever kissed *him*!"

"Not exactly," Karl laughed. "I'd as soon kiss the back of a Quackenbos Grammar. But you listen to me," he pursued, his bright aquamarine eyes full upon her. "Would you have carried on in this curious way if it *had* been the Quackenbos Grammar?"

"Of course not! How silly!" she cried, and then stopped on a horrified gasp at this further betrayal.

The man's gaze fell away. "Steady there, you Karl Trenham," he warned himself mentally. "You can't get tied up to a child."

Together they paced on in silence. From the

tense figure close by his side there seemed actual power emitted—a vibration of quivering life that made even the sweep of the wind like a dream.

As the troublesome quiet continued, Trenham ventured a partial look round. Sophie's upturned gaze was following white clouds, and, reassured, he began to study her face.

There was something arresting about her, no getting away from that fact. Other girls had a sheen on their hair like the wings of bronze turkeys in sunshine, and the bloom of white grapes on their skin. But where else could he find the wide thoughtful spacing of brows, the revealing expression, the radium glow of intelligence?

"By George, if the filly were nineteen or twenty, instead of the kid she is——" Karl thought, then fired the query, "How old are you, Sophie?"

"I'll be seventeen next March," she told him, and added demurely, "My grandmother Baring was married when she was sixteen."

"This is March," he smiled, "which means that you've just reached the date of your grandmother's marriage."

"Yes, but I liked the sound of it better that other way," Sophie purled in the humblest of voices.

"Why?" Trenham demanded on the impulse, then seeing her dimple, backed off. "Never mind, I—I—didn't mean it. You needn't tell me——" he stammered.

Alas for the self-seeking worldling, and all of his crude inhibitions. As if she had fathomed his thoughts Sophie stood, for an instant, quite still, and then, with a certain slow meaning, raised her dark, freighted eyes to his. In hers the young man saw pleading, intense adoration, and a pink flaming face in which, Narcissus-like, he gazed at his own.

He tried to fall back, but she held him; for these were the eyes of a worshipping woman.

All of the artless abandon was gone. Her hour was upon her. Slowly—slowly—with eyes wildly staring, Trenham felt himself being drawn down into two splendid whirlpools of love. Many a swimmer much stronger than Karl—more worldly and older—might well have been lured and engulfed.

He drew in one swift, sobbing breath, like that of an animal trapped, and flung out an arm as though to balance himself at the edge of a just disclosed chasm.

Sophie caught the blind hand. At her touch, his look leapt into fire. In mute answer she bent the bright head as a slave to her master, but her lips—cold, and shaken with passion—found and clung to the hand.

"Sophie! *Sophie!*" he groaned. "Don't do that! A fellow can't stand it—you know. You—you—mustn't!"

As by magic the tables were turned.

"What mustn't I do—Karl?" The question swelled out from the throat of a thrush in the springtime.

"Th—th—*that!*" the ecstatic, unhappy man stammered, while making the feeblest of efforts to wrench his hand out of her own.

"You are only a schoolgirl. I oughtn't!" he beat on the door of discretion. "Oh, my Lord!" he cried out in a voice of beseeching, "what in hell can a poor fellow do when you love him like that!"

"There's a lot a poor fellow can do," the laughing thrush fluted. "And one thing the best—I couldn't well mention."

Karl threw caution to the winds. He dived headlong in brilliant abandon, and fell in the perfume of roses.

"Is it this?" he whispered, holding her close. "This? You rapturous darling! You have gone to my head like strong wine. I am mad—frenzied—drunken about you. Keep still, my own love. My pretty sweet baby, my wife to be. Karl is going to set this first kiss of your life on those red hungry lips that are waiting, you sweet, unplucked flower—you angel——"

Four lips caught and crushed the hysterical phrases, sunk to murmurous sobbing of rapture—and then into an exquisite void.

When that long kiss was over, the girl sagged in his arms. "I—I—can't breathe," she got out, then,

as if to his shiver of bliss, "I believe I am dead and in heaven."

Sophie looked up. The clouds had gone, the wind was driving, and the whole sky was blue as Karl's eyes, when the lovers at last started down the long road to the village.

CHAPTER XIX

"SIS" KICKS UP SAND

THE effect of the news upon Miss Ossie was the stripping off, in a single passionate gesture, of long years of acquired self-command. A new Aunt Ossie appeared—one strange and terrible to Mildred—a being of wild mountain speech, clad in raw primitive hues of sheer frenzy.

"The low-lived young skunk. The cheap trifler,—and he caught by a hussy like that! To leave you in the lurch, and make you the laugh of the village!" she screamed out, beating thin arms in the air, and clutching her fingers as though grasping the head of the culprit.

"James Gaither shall even him up for this dev'l-mint!" she stormed. "We won't stand it nohow—Milly-girl. And if James won't—him being so peaked and slow-moving—I'll goard Christopher Laird into gunning him."

It was Mildred who told her—a white, shaken Mildred who had just a few moments before been whispered the great secret by a giggling Letty.

"Yes, Sophie and Cousin Karl are engaged," Letty confided. "Mrs. Hallonquist don't want it to get out yet; she says Sophie's too young, and it

is all ridiculous. She took on at first something terrible—Sophie says—and she may send Sophie to school somewhere off from Dunrobin, in hopes she will get over it.”

As this outburst was met by silence, Letty added, “Miss Mary doesn’t know Sophie if she thinks that. But isn’t it awfully romantic and exciting?”

In the presence of her young sister, Mildred had been able to restrain all signs of emotion. Her reserve, unlike that of her mountain-bred aunt, was a thing not of veneer but of fibre. But the elder girl, left alone in the hallway downstairs, where she had encountered Letty, put both hands to her eyes for a moment, and leaned rather heavily against the wall. Then feeling her way upward, step by step, her hand on the old polished balustrade, she crept to the shelter of Auntie.

There was here no need for repression or concealment. Mildred’s heart lay as bare to those famished old love-eyes of Ossie as a shallow white rose to the sun. They had whispered, planned, hoped and talked together, and the hero of all of their bright dreams of Mildred’s future life had been Karl.

The dreadful news was simply and quietly told. Ossie could not believe it at first. She stared hard at her niece.

“It’s a lie! It’s a durned lie! You be fooling me, Mildred,” she said fiercely, grasping the girl by an arm.

"Oh, Auntie! If it only *was* fooling!" cried the other in despair, and wrenching herself free, flung a shivering, sobbing young form to her Aunt's wide patchwork quilt on the bed.

Then Ossie went mad, and began her torrent of invective.

"Please stop, Aunt Ossie. There's no use saying such terrible things of Karl—or of me either," Mildred protested. "I've told you that Karl never addressed me—not by words—though I did think he—cared. Oh, I can't pretend even to my own heart that I didn't believe he was going to. And I wanted it so!" she sobbed piteously. "But that's all at an end. I see now that it was only the love of a cousin."

"Cousin! Hell-fi-ah and brimstone!" spat Ossie. "That won't do, Milly-girl. I tell you he give you and me every claim to believe he was courting. Where's them sheeps-eyes he throwed you—them soft looks and titters? And eternally grabbing your hand underneath the table? Only a two-night a-gone he was trying to kiss you. I seen him!"

Mildred writhed in her place. "Oh, Auntie," she moaned, as if those last words were the final and quite unendurable turn to the wheel of her rack, "don't say it! It's the one thing I can't bear! I had lost him that kiss as a wager—he was only in fun. It really meant nothing."

"Well, he'll find it's going to mean something,"

said Ossie between her set teeth. "Don't you sob so, poor darling. You just take Auntie's word as how it was plumb right and natural for us to hold him as honest,—the low, sneaking sheep-stealing dawg! And to think your own father is made him,—is took him in as full partner. Where'd the coward skunk be, if it wasn't for his start in the tower works? But we'll stop all that. I'll make it my business to see him kicked out of James's office before sundown. You bide here, and smooth yourself; Aunt Ossie will see justice done."

The speaker had dashed for the door, but as she reached it Mildred sprang up in bed.

"No,—no. Don't tell Father! Don't tell Uncle Chris! and not *Letty*. It's enough for us two to know. I can't be humiliated before the whole family. Oh, Auntie—for my sake—please—please! And then Father can't spare Karl from the works."

"We'll see whether or no James can spare him!" shrilled Ossie, one hand on the knob. "Your Pap's downstairs now—and I might as well have this thing over and done with."

Not only James Gaither but Chris were seated together, each smoking, in front of the library grate.

As Ossie flew in—an arrow sped straight from a twanged bowstring of fury, Chris instinctively threw up his left elbow to ward off the blow; while James Gaither, who belonged to that type of unbelligerent male which fears more than anything

else in the world the lash of a feminine tongue, merely sat very erect in his chair, withdrew his cigar, and held it apart at a tremulous angle.

"James Gaither, I want you should kick out that scoundrelly Trenham—and do it this evening. Don't wait," she announced herself without preface.

"But Ossie,—what—what's—the man done?" faltered Gaither, when sufficient breath had returned to deliver the sentence.

"He's played fast and loose with your Mildred. That's what he's done!" declared the sister-in-law. "He's a jilt and a trickster. He oughter be cowhided to an inch of his no-count young life. If Chris here was half of a man," Ossie paused to shed down the scorn of her small blazing eyes to her unperturbed brother, "he'd seek the low critter out and beat all his bones to a bran-mash!"

"My good God!" James was muttering as if to the fire, "Karl a jilt and a scoundrel,—he's played fast and loose! Ossie, try to speak calmly. I must know——"

Chris, with a gesture carefully hidden from Ossie, bade the father keep still. His own quiet face was now raised to his sister.

"Sit down, Sis," he urged mildly. "You be shivering worse than a sick dawg. Sit, and tell us about it, calm-like, and not gasping."

"I cain't sit," wailed Ossie. "If you'd seen what I saw, that poor Mildred of ours lying flat

on my bed, and shaking the four posts with crying! —I can't stand it nohow!"

As the listeners made no comment, Ossie's anger rose to new heights. "If you two poor-spirited he-critters won't go after Trenham, I'll go myself. I'll claw him with these here ten fingers—you see me! I'll scrape all the hide offen his grinning pink face—and I'll laugh when I'm doing it!"

"You sit," pursued Chris, as if she had been speaking gently. "Here, I'll give you a hunch just back of your knee-jints to help you onloosen. There,—that's better!" he said, as the woman, collapsed by a dexterous blow, was forced to sit down to an armchair.

She tried to spring up, but Chris laid a large, firm hand at the front of her stays, and no amount of squirming was able to remove it.

"You see, Sister Ossie," said James, clearing his throat and his voice, "what you've been suggesting——"

"Suggesting! Not much—I don't reckon!" flashed Ossie, a fresh spurt of vinegar that cut down the emollient low tone. "I said right straight out, and I now repeat it, that viper you've warmed in your bosom—what you made a full partner—his return for the kindness you've showed him, is breaking your poor daughter's heart."

Chris shot the father a side glance.

"Do you mean, Sis," he inquired, "that the

youngster done asked Milly to wed him, and then backed on the trail?"

Ossie showed her first hint of confusion.

"He ain't asked her in words," she admitted. "Though he's done it in every other way. Mildred had every right to expect he was going to address her."

"Yes," mused Chris, leaning down to the grate for a coal to place on his pipe, "I've noted how you been aiding Milly into expecting it."

Before a fresh scourge of hot words could be wielded, James Gaither broke in.

"Well, Ossie, the affair is unfortunate. That much I admit, but it seems to me nothing worse than a misunderstanding. Very naturally it grieves me to know that dear Mildred's unhappy, yet she is young, and has other beaux. She will soon get over it, and as for my personal feelings—I can tell you now frankly," he paused, venturing towards his sister-in-law the ghost of a smile, "I am more relieved at the outcome than I can well express."

To this Chris nodded a solemn approval, and deep in his heart said, "Amen!"

"Air both of you out of your *senses*?" asked Ossie, her basilisk eyes turned now to one, now to the other of the two timid faces. "Can't you neither one see, he's the likeliest man and the best catch in Dunrobin? And *she's* got him fast enough! The bit's in his jaw. It's what she and that fly-by-

night daughter is worked for! But that don't help Milly. So you ain't aiming to kick this scamp out of your business—Brother James?"

There was no reply to her query. A tense breathless silence had fallen upon her listeners, at which the speaker, refreshing herself by a shuddering sigh, continued more plaintively:

"I wouldn't be minding the whole pizen mess quite so much, if it warn't for the woman that's got him. Oh, she knows her business—that white sneaking hypocrite that twists both you men around her finger.

"I sized her up first thing I come to Dunrobin. I seen through her plain as the nose on my face. No woman don't fool Ossie Laird."

James sat very straight. "Of whom are you speaking? Not of Mary Hallonquist?—I'm certain of this much at least. Mary knows!"

Miss Laird flared around. "What would a full-blooded young colt like Karl Trenham be courting a weazened old widow-woman like that? It is Sophie, that chit of a schoolgirl what's hooked him; but you can lay out for certain it was Sophie's Maw what baited the hook."

"Now, the Lord bless my soul! Little Sophie!" Gaither exclaimed. "It is simply incredible. Why, the girl is only a baby! She's younger, the best part of a year, than my Letty. It seems only a few days ago——"

"I guess you've forgotten, James Gaither," came

Ossie's harsh voice, "that your Letty's exactly the age Leezer was when you come to the mountain and married her."

"So she is, so she is, though it seems so impossible," the man answered, and passed a thin tremulous hand slowly over his forehead. "As usual, Ossie, you are right."

"And I'm right," said the woman in bitter triumph, "when I tell you it's been brought about, slow and careful, and watching each thread in the loom, by that sweet friend of yours, Mary Hallonquist."

"No, Ossie, in this thing at least you are mistaken. I have reason to know it. Indeed, I assure you Mrs. Hallonquist will not permit it. She admires and likes Karl, as all of us do."

Ossie brushed him aside like a fly.

"As for the woman allowing, you know for yourself, Brother James, that that there upstarting Sophie don't give no more heed to her Maw's prayers and pleading than I do to Christopher here."

Chris's shoulders drooped forward, at this lash of his sister's invective, but one eye, clear to James, yet withdrawn from Ossie, gave a slow, solemn wink of delight.

"You're distraught on that subject, James—and my brother's an idjit along with you," Ossie continued. "But I seen through them drooping white eyelids and that little soft voice, what a man's

got to bend close to hear. As I said before, that widder *she* knows her business. She's the kind can fool you he-critters, but her own sect sees through her."

She paused to gain breath. Chris, huddled down in his chair, had been slowly inflating.

"Well, I guess I'll be moseyin' on," he timidly ventured. "Ole man Youngblood'll be thinking I've quit him."

James, with a galvanized gesture, withdrew his big watch. "I'll walk down with you, Chris," he declared. "I too, am long behind."

Ossie planted her hands on her hips and protruded sharp elbows. "Don't you men think you're deceiving me none," she remarked, eyeing each squirming creature in turn. "I know what you're getting away from—and it ain't no concern for your offices. You air running away on account of that pious female you is both crazy over——"

But the last words came flat against the inner side of a quickly closed door.

By the time the two chastened culprits had passed the length of the residence district, Chris saw moving toward them, in the exact centre of the wide red-clay thoroughfare, a big mountain wagon.

The schooner's cover, once the delicate cream of home-spun white cotton, was spattered and streaked yellow-pink by the mountain road mud. The driver, a long, lean, bronzed man with a small dark moustache,—a man quite strikingly comely,

—sat doubled up on the front seat in the pose of a big letter "N."

The reins hung loose in his hands, while he stared out to the haunches of two well-fed mules. In the headgear of each animal were stuck a couple of vivid plumes of red sumac.

"Appears to me I must know him," said Chris to himself. "He sure favours some fellow I used to know on the mountain—and yet—I cain't be plumb certain."

"Makes you feel rather homesick, I reckon," remarked James, smiling to note Chris's eager eyes. He had grown through the years to love this shy brother of Leezer's very dearly. "But look there, Chris," whispered James, "I believe the driver knows you. He is looking. By George, he has recognized you! Yes——"

But the last part of the sentence was never said, for a loud "Whoa, ye beasties!" and a reverberant cry, "God-a'mighty! Hang me up by my withers, if it ain't old Chris Laird!" went through Chris like a succession of voltages.

"'Lonzo Thigpen!" he screamed, and made one rush for the wagon. "My good God! you young hell-cat,—you hound-dawg,—you long-legged *spider!*" he cried in such abandonment of rapture, that James Gaither stared hard, not more than half believing his own eyes or ears.

"Brother Jim, it's 'Lonzo," beamed Chris, dragging the slender young giant toward Mr. Gaither.

"I ain't seen him for so many years, and he's sprung up so high, no wonder I'd never have known him. Mr. Gaither, my brother-in-law,—you know, Leezer's husband—this is Mr. 'Lonzo Thigpen of the far side of old Painter's Bald," Chris panted, snatching out for the manners that Ossie had tried so hard to instil.

James grasped the lean mountain hand very cordially, and murmured conventional greetings.

This was not quite enough for Chris's idea of welcome.

"An'—an'—'Lonzo must come by our house for a spell fo' he starts up to the mountings—now, mustn't he?"

Gaither gave one swift glance to huge mud-plastered feet, and lifted his eyes along homespun jeans trousers that rippled and sunk like a sand-bank with red clay in the hollows. Then he met the man's steady regard, and the faint tremor of snobbishness, mixed with fear of what Ossie might say, left James utterly.

"Yes, indeed, Mr. Thigpen," he seconded. "It would not do for you to leave town without stopping by to see us. You must try to persuade your friend to remain over to tea," he said, turning directly to the tremulous Chris.

'Lonzo's grave face relaxed. "It be kind of you to ask," he began, when Chris, actually throwing both arms around his waist, cried aloud, "Mighty kind! Hell! he wants you,—don't you

see for yourself, 'Lonzo? He wants you,—as for me, I cain't stand your going away on a sudden nohow. I've got a small room of my own, don't even Ossie go in it. I've got things to show you,—a microscope," he whispered impressively, "and a whole lot of critters don't grow on the mountings. And there be five thousand questions I'm wantin' to ask ye. You come along now with me, or I'm apt to shoot you right in the pants."

CHAPTER XX

A KNIGHT OF THE TIMBERS

THE big schooner was hitched directly in front of the staid Gaither home, 'Lonzo going about the performance with the grave care and precision he might have been using on Stone Top. Just as he was turning himself into an angleworm across the rim of one of the huge mud-caked wheels in order to lift out the fodder for his mules, Chris, less graceful and pliant, struggled up to another wheel, grating off much crimson soil in the process, and plunged eager hands to the load.

The sweet, acrid scent of the shucks as he tossed them went to his brain. He sniffed it with ecstasy.

"Smells like old miller Gosnel's on a hot grinding day at his gris'-mill," he murmured with eyelids half closed.

Still feeling about for what he might find, his thick, sensitively-tipped fingers encountered a glazed surface.

"Moonshine!" said Chris under his breath, and then drew his head from the wagon, to search out 'Lonzo's face for a wink. 'A look at once sly,

boyish, and old in iniquity, made gay dancing imps of Chris's eyes.

"No, that ain't no honey-jug, Chris. It ain't lifted from no water-grass by a crick-side," the other remarked placidly. "We air stopped all that totin' for ages."

"You don't say it, now! Then what you got here?" Chris demanded, as a new concealed object rewarded his fumbings. "It feels like a big pasteboard box, kinder poky and springy."

"It air that," conceded Alonzo. "Haul it out. It's a passel of all manner of doodingles I bought in the town."

Chris began to pull vigorously. His tongue, thrust far out, acquired a rich layer of hay dust. With a last angry rustle of shucks, the huge package was free.

'Lonzo cast down toward it the languid proud look of possession. "If we's ready to step indoors now," he remarked, "we might as well take it in with us."

Chris was staggering under his load, an enormous green box of glazed pasteboard, with a label on top, which declared it had come from Dunrobin's "Emporium."

All of the pangs of aroused curiosity, supposed to inhere in the breast of the middle-aged female, now clawed at Chris's masculine vitals. He finally asked pleadingly, "How come you been buying out all the whole store of James Weldon & Co.?"

'Lonzo turned around and smiled. It seemed in Chris's eyes like a shaft of clear light on a mountain. "Don't you reckon," the visitor drawled, deliberately teasing the other, "that Weldon is got pritty things for he-critters?"

"And you sw'ar you ain't fitting yourself for a bridegroom?"

"I'll swear," replied the cryptic Alonzo.

Chris gave it up. By this time the two had come to the steps leading up to the main doorway.

"Take the side-trail," Chris cautioned; "Ossie don't let me to go into the front, without I stops on the brick walk, and scrapes the mud off my shoes. I got steps at the back, that runs straight to my own little hogpen. I goes that way. It's safer."

Alonzo deflected with a haste that bespoke vivid memories of Miss Ossie. He never once offered to take the great load from his friend, but strode on before as if Chris was a pack-mule and he its free master.

Chris slid the big box to the planks of the verandah, where it lay for hours utterly forgotten, and producing a small bunch of keys proceeded to open his door.

"I keeps it locked," the host explained. "It's to keep out them blasted house-cleaners."

The men stepped within, Alonzo in the lead.

"I see you still cares for bug-critters," remarked the visitor politely, as his broad hat remained in

the air, being caught up and held by a specially thick and tenacious cobweb.

Chris flushed with annoyance. He felt as a mother whose favourite child had been naughty before strangers.

"I'd plumb forgotten that tough net of ole Epeira Diadema," he apologized. "I trained it up so that it just misses my head, but I should have known yours would go higher."

Still murmuring penitent phrases, Chris caught down the hat, and with a crooked elbow began to wipe away the grey skeins.

"That bait-gourd there in the corner," observed 'Lonzo, in a kindly effort to withdraw the bereaved Chris's attention. "It looks powerfully like old fishing days. I didn't realize you had fishing here."

"We doesn't. Don't touch it!" Chris cried as if in anguish, and dropping the hat he plunged across the room toward Alonzo. "It ain't got fish-bait in it. It's chuck full of mud, where I'm trying to hatch out a new brand of caterpillar."

"Kin to that on your bed?" inquired Alonzo. His tone was still courteous, but his words had an edge.

The distracted householder, replacing the gourd in its niche, hurried back to where a venomous-looking reptile, the length of one's finger, and covered with bristling red hair, was making a leisurely progress across the counterpane.

Chris bent over, extending a thumb and forefinger, then he paused, shook his head, and opening a top drawer, took out a pair of slim forceps.

"This here kind," he told Alonzo, whose good-natured smile had returned, "has a fuzz like the stinging of nettles." While talking, Chris had lifted the creature in his forceps, and standing on tiptoes, disposed him on the twigs of a bare branch that was tacked over the head of his bed, and from which were suspended three shrivelled cocoons, like big may-pops.

"Well now, we be shot of the whole lot," said Chris in a tone of relief. "You go perch on that rocking-chair by the window."

"No! *don't* sit!" he shrieked wildly, as 'Lonzo's long legs bent at the knees. "Lemme grab up them papers and books,—there is microscope slides stuck amongst them, and they'll bust if you sit."

When the surface was cleared, Alonzo cautiously seated himself. The day was not warm, but the guest now withdrew from his pocket a huge handkerchief of navy-blue cotton, thickly sprinkled with stars, and began to wipe off a moist forehead.

"I'll camp on this side of the bed," beamed Chris. "Now, old wild-cat, I want to hear every Gawd's bit of news from His country. How's your Paw and your Maw?"

Scarcely waiting to hear that the latter was "dade," and the former was quite spry, Chris

drove on. "And old Esau, our horse? I suppose it ain't in nature the old beast is ambling yet?"

'Lonzo shook his head, as he answered with all the solemnity due to bereavement.

"No, Chris—we have skunt and tanned poor old Esau a matter of five years ago. He made powerful good leather, bein' so tough and stringy. We buried his bones and his chit'lins just from kind feeling todes you and Miss Ossie," Alonzo added consolingly.

"That was sure good of you," said Chris, and for some moments afterward sat huddled together in a silence that grieved for the dear equine departed.

"And your next brother, Tim. Air he married?" inquired Chris, as though Tim were akin to the corpse.

"Yes, he's hooked," said Alonzo succinctly.

"That long-legged Amy of old miller Gosnel, she ketched him. She's a good gal enough," 'Lonzo hastened to add. "And I'm in nowise faultin' her. She've a fine head of young'uns a'ready. It's only that she's like the runnin' of all of them young mounting fillies,—they's pretty an' happy, with white teeth to show when they's laffin', for about thirty year—an' then all to onct they begin bendin' over an' shrivellin'. Their ha'r an' their teeth all falls out, an' they ties up their heads fer neuralgy. It was so with yo' mother an' with mine."

Chris nodded a dejected affirmative.

"If ever it be that I should wed," declared the visitor, "I aim to pick out that sort of a gal what will grow to a pretty old lady."

"Then ye'll have to pick here," remarked Chris, in a tone of decision, his mind being full of Miss Mary. "Them lasting kinds don't grow on the mountings."

For an hour or more the swift questions and answers were tossed to and fro, and it was the savoury odours of ham being fried in the kitchen that brought Chris back to his duty as host.

"Sakes alive, man!" he exclaimed, jumping up. "That supper-bell it'll ring before we knows it. We got to spruce-up and be thinking of joining the ladies."

Alonzo unfolded his joints, and slowly attained his great height. His large feet stamped vigorously on the floor, at which square cakes of mud, like red icing, fell away and remained, hard as chips.

"You might wash down them pants with a hair-brush," Chris delicately suggested. "And that poker can beat off the rest of the mud from your brogans. You can do it right here in my room, if you minds to. Baby Doll'll come in and shovel me out Saturday morning."

'Lonzo followed Chris's eyes, down the undulant trouser legs to his boots. A mysterious smile dawned on his lips. There was something about his

whole attitude so concessive that Chris ventured further.

"We got a big bath tub two doors off from this room," the host imparted to his guest. "There's hot water and cold. It's fine. Ossie makes me wash me all over every day. If you have any notion to try it——" he paused for more breath. The glance sent upwards to 'Lonzo's bronzed face was a trifle apprehensive.

"Blaze the trail!" cried this knight of the timbers. "I'm to come to it soon,—and this here's a bully good time for to take my first lesson."

"What you trying to say, 'Lonzo Thigpen?" the other demanded, his eyes crinkling small with perplexity. "What you mean about coming to it soon?"

"Drag in old James Weldon & Co., an' I'll tell ye," said 'Lonzo, beginning to giggle like a young girl.

Chris dashed from the door, and came back pulling the box by a string.

"Dump 'er down on yo' baid," ordered the tall mountaineer. "Ye didn't suppose, did ye," he inquired a little resentfully, "that I'd took that invite from Mr. Gaither if I thought I was goin' to set in to his table in clothes lookin' like a muddy old razor-back up from a hog-waller?"

"No, they's clothes in that box," 'Lonzo continued. "A new suit from the shelves in old Weldon's—an' underwear, shirts, socks, new shoes,

an' fine long kervats, to hang down my shirt-front. More'n a hunderd the hull outfit cost me."

The two, eager now as young débutantes whose ball frocks have just been sent home, tore away many strings and flung the green box top far under the bed.

"Jimmanetiky jump-ups!" sighed Chris, as he seized on a pair of pale yellow socks, striped merrily round with green circles. "But ain't them winners! Now that's what I call somethin' *like*. Ossie won't let me wear nothing gayer than these pesky black ones, what turns brown in the wash."

He stuck forth at an angle one disconsolate shank. 'Lonzo nodded his sympathy, and then his proud eye returned to his own superior possessions.

"Lord, man! don't stop here any longer, but get in that wash tub and lather," pleaded Chris, to whom all of this excitement had brought abnormal energy. "I've half of a mind to go along too, and scour you—to get through quicker. I can't wait to see how you'll look in them plaid pants."

CHAPTER XXI

LEEZER'S DAUGHTER

WHILE 'Lonzo was gone, Chris went through each new-smelling garment. He fingered them lovingly, smiling on each, just as in her own home "Miss Mary" would pat and caress the pretty things bought for her Sophie.

Alonzo returned, looking a little ridiculous in Chris's flannel night-shirt that was pressed into use as a bath-robe, for his red-brown legs showed to the knees. His hair, yet black in its wetness, stuck out in long wedges over his ears and the back of his neck. His host gazed on the bristling points, and longed to cut them.

"Yes, you're plumb clean and pretty," Chris exclaimed in a gratified voice. "Let me get one look back of your ears. They're all right—clean as if Ossie herself had been at you. And how 'bout them finger-nails? We down in the low-country is powerful perticular about such."

The docile Alonzo extended two long, virile hands the colour of copper.

"Erh-huh!" grieved Chris, shaking his head. "If grass-seeds blew under them nails, you'd be needing a scythe-blade to mow them. Here, sit by

the window—I can get at you better than standing. We got to scoop every one out, same as the holler of a tooth when it's aching."

"Is you kept yo's scooped all these years?" demanded the victim, as Chris, kneeling down to the floor, and armed with a toothpick and a pair of hedge-clippers, began excavations.

"I don't have to," said Chris, grinning broadly. "I bites them off."

'Lonzo winced, not so much at the statement but because at the instant the point of the shears reached the quick of his thumb.

"What they taste like, the whilst ye be chaw-in'?" he inquired rather faintly, "I ain't never tried yet, an' I 'low I won't take to the flavour—but sence I'm p'inted to live in yo' city——"

"There! You've said it again!" exclaimed Chris, and his shears clattered to the floor. "Have it out, man—don't keep up these onderhand hintings."

"Ain't no onderhand hintin's," protested the badgered Alonzo. "It's a fact I bin tryin' to state for how long—a fact as plain as the nose on yo' face. An' it would be hard to find anything plainer," he added unkindly, "for it looks like an old devil's snuff-box, before it's ready to bust."

Chris drew back. He coloured as though 'Lonzo had struck him.

"How-come you feel called to spend words on my nose?" he asked in a high, injured voice. "It's

doing no harm to nobody. I merely was interested—we being friends—in hoping you might be coming here to the valley,—and you goes making fun of my nose.” As he spoke a thick, tremulous hand was caressing the affronted member.

’Lonzo’s facile, thin face grew remorseful.

“It was only my pizenous temper, old-hop-toad,” he placated. “This here thumb is hurtin’ yet. I’m a sheep-stealin’ dawg for to sass ye. Your nose is a whole passel better’n this hawk-beak o’ mine.” He flipped at the beak with his free hand, to show his disdain. “An’ the hull mounting knows,” he went on, determined to sooth the last touch of resentment, “that yo’s is the keenest far-smeller on Painter’s Bald.”

This tribute brought back the smiles to Chris’s clouded visage.

“Tell me quick, then—all my bones is a-watering to hear about them plans for you to move down here to the valley.”

“Well, it seems that big furniture fact’ry of yours acrost the river is callin’ in all the big hick’-ries an’ walnuts an’ hazels they kin git, and we’s had so much trouble with agints—dirty rats, I calls ’em,” went on ’Lonzo vindictively, “that the only way we could see to pertect our own intrusts, was to open an office ourselves an’ put a good man here to run it.”

“And you be that man,” affirmed Chris, in blissful conviction.

"Yes, I be. An' this here's my las' trip up the mountings for long. The nex' time I travel, it'll be in another man's waggin, an' another man hold-in' the reins. It sure will feel funny."

'Lonzo reached for a shirt. "Seems like this here bright pink one with pritty blue stripes would be cheerful," he suggested, holding forth a large garment in mid-air. "An' the kervat to go with it—let's see—yes—this here hit's the bead! It's flowin' an' long—an' I allays was partial to blue things."

Chris wrinkled his eyes like a connoisseur. To his vision, trained in the shimmering hues of beetle wings and the cream-coloured eggs of his spiders, the necktie appeared to be a violent pokeberry magenta.

"Yes—they'll do well enough," he assented doubtfully. "Can you put them on all by yourself?"

Having demonstrated this ability, Alonzo leaned forward to peer into Chris's greenish mirror. "Now 'bout partin' my hair—how's yo's done?" asked the tall mountaineer looking around over one shoulder toward Chris.

"Lord, don't look at mine!" cried the embarrassed model, "it grows like a scant patch of rye on the mountains. There's partings in it every which way you turns. But Brother James draws a straight path through the bushes, over his left ear like this——" he caught up a comb, jerked

'Lonzo down by a shoulder, and ploughed a long row in his scalp.

"Ouch!" protested Alonzo. "He don't hev to dig up the skin with it, do he?"

"You wait," ordered Chris. "What's the matter with us, is that I've forgotten to light. You do it like this," he explained condescendingly, drawing a match along 'Lonzo's new shirt bosom, and proceeding to turn up the gas. "You don't blow it out when it's lighted. You turn it with your finger and thumb,—like this."

The wavering blue fan of a flame, that had for an instant thrown brown colour and depth into 'Lonzo's dark wondering eyes, popped back into its tube.

"Dad-burn it! The whole thing is gone," Chris said petulantly, "and all my matches are spilt. That's right, scratch a new one," he encouraged, as 'Lonzo stooping swiftly, was heard to scrape his clean finger-nails over the floor in search for the matches.

"Scratch her anywhere," said Chris generously, "so's you don't go too far into the corner. I've a special fine web hanging there. Now we've got her. You see how the turning is done?" he triumphed, as a long tongue of gas went shrieking up toward the ceiling.

"Yes—yes!!" cried Alonzo. "Don't show me again. I got two splinters now in my fingers. I

won't blow her out. I don't like the stink of her nohow."

Leaving Alonzo to add a few lingering touches to his masculine beauty, Chris slipped from the room, and, with heart growing heavier each moment, and feet like two large squares of ice, went in search of Miss Ossie. James had not come yet, and the housekeeper had to be told of her imminent guest at the table.

Chris knocked on his sister's closed door. It was not the bold rap of a cave-man. He paused, fist suspended, but no summons came. He was trying to get the courage for a second attempt when, in the dimly lit hall, from across the way, Mildred opened a door, and tiptoed in his direction. Her finger was raised to warn him against further noise.

Even in this flickering light, Chris's eyes were quick to take in the girl's altered appearance.

Mildred had been weeping long, yet the marks of her grief served but to deepen the blueness of her large gentle eyes, and to lend a new sweetness and dignity to her usually smiling face. The gown which she wore, a simple dark blue, with white cuffs and collar, brought out all of the gold in her hair, and the delicate tints of her skin.

Never had Mildred looked quite so much like her mother, and seeing it, Chris's heart grew tender.

"Is Ossie sick, Milly?" he whispered.

His niece nodded. "Poor, poor Auntie," she murmured. "She is suffering so much with her head that she can't lift it from the pillow."

To the girl's utter amazement her uncle proceeded to catch her around her slim waist, and try to dance down the long hall. From his lips came in snatches of muffled thanksgiving such expressions as, "Of all the luck! The Lord's sure with me an' 'Lonzo, an' I wisht I could shout it out loud."

"*Uncle Chris,*" Mildred exclaimed, drawing away when they had gained the back door, that led to the upper verandah, "are you crazy—to be dancing like this? Are you glad poor Aunt Ossie is suffering?"

"No, child, no," said Chris hastily. "You can't understand yet. We've some company for supper,—your Paw asked him. It was none of my doin'—though God knows I wanted it bad."

"Company for supper?" repeated Mildred, plainly showing her chagrin.

"Only 'Lonzo Thigpen," placated Chris. "He's from the mountains. My best friend—'Lonzo. Your Paw will be kind to him, but I warn't sure of Ossie. Being upset as she is, she might fling a cup or saucer at 'Lonzo. She clove down the calf of his leg once—she did—and 'Lonzo's been scared of her ever since.

"But you'll be nice to him, Milly—now won't you?" Chris pleaded. "You won't laugh at his

talk—and you'll turn your eyes sidewise, if he licks off the spout of the molasses pitcher—now promise."

"I promise," said Mildred, half laughing, half crying. It was not to her taste much more than to Ossie's to have an intruder at the close of that tragic day. But, after all, what else mattered?

"I hear Father now," she exclaimed, as the front door downstairs opened and closed. "And perhaps I'd better warn Letty."

"Yes, do," whispered her uncle, "though I tell you, if that sassy young filly dares make fun of 'Lonzo before me, she'll rue it."

"Oh, she'll be all right, and me too, Uncle Chris. You needn't worry."

"And I can bring 'Lonzo down soon's he's ready?"

"At once. Baby Doll has the tea-bell in her hands now."

With Mr. Thigpen presented to both of his nieces, and safely "set in" to the broad mahogany table, Chris drew a great sigh of relief.

An old-fashioned chandelier hung above the company. The four gas-jets, with rays interlaced, threw cross-lights upon the small circle. The large plaids on Alonzo's new coat, which in daylight would surely reverberate, melted here to a dignified grey. Even the pink shirt and pokeberry tie, gained a tone of comparative quiet, and above them the keen, vivid face of the man, with its straight

level brows over eyes that were brown as the table, gleamed out in the hues of a Rembrandt.

It was with difficulty that James Gaither restrained himself from staring. He could scarcely believe it the same lank, uncouth mountaineer from the backwoods to whom he had given the invitation.

Letty, discarding such rules of politeness, looked long and straight at their guest. She thought she had never seen eyes so steady and so searching, nor a mouth that could be quite so grave under its small thatch of bronze-brown moustache. She had been reading Tennyson lately, and she was sure that in armour, and in a flowing white mantle, here would be the exact Launcelot of her dreams.

As for Mildred, after the first casual glance, she scarcely seemed to perceive Alonzo. For her, all interest in the male sex was over. During that long terrible day she had wavered between what appeared to her the only two alternatives: first, a picturesque suicide, based on that of the unhappy Ophelia,—or a long life embittered by grief, and dedicated to a tragic virginity. Suicide having at length been discarded, because of Mildred's fear of the water, there remained only a self-imposed withering on a stalk Karl had stripped of its blossoms.

Alonzo was abnormally hungry. He held in his mind the sad fact that fine folk in the city never are betrayed into putting a knife into their mouths.

For the first ten minutes or so, the guest's brows were kept frowning, and his mouth grim, in the effort to appease a keen appetite and at the same time refrain from his usual method of transmitting his food. Having been fairly successful, though there were still bits of ham that refused to be speared by his fork, 'Lonzo raised his dark eyes and deliberately set them on Mildred.

"'Lonzo ain't hitched-up yet," broke in Chris—and then recalling his manners—"that is, Mr. Thigpen ain't married," he explained.

"No?" said Gaither politely, and turned his kind smile to the bachelor in question. "Why, I always understood, Mr. Thigpen, that you men of the mountains married quite early in life."

"They do mostly," replied 'Lonzo, his eyes still on Mildred, "but with me somehow it's bin diffrent."

A queer silence fell upon the group.

Something shivered and quickened in Mildred, as one leaf, on a very still day, begins suddenly and without apparent cause to flutter. Her eyes met those of the visitor, and they held the dawn of a question.

'Lonzo laid down his knife and his fork. "Yes," he repeated, even more slowly, "with me it's bin diffrent. As a boy I loved one lady—she was older, an' too far above me. It war Leezer—the lady you married," he said, looking straight at James Gaither.

As no one spoke, Alonzo added: "They's bin no other rose on the mountings as sweet as the one that blowed for you. I loved her, boy as I was, an' I had thought not to love nairy other. It didn't seem like in nature thar ever could be sech another, —but I've found out tonight as they be."

With the swiftness of light, his deep passionate look flew back to Mildred. The girl's hand faltered up to her throat. Heat and cold trembled through her, as shadow and sun fret a wheatfield.

'Lonzo leaned a few inches closer. "I'm comin' to Dunrobin to live, and be near to you, Miss Mildred," pronounced this strange knight of the timbers, and seeing her eyes shrink and fall, he laughed low, a laugh full of masterful sweetness. The teeth that his smile now displayed were even and white.

"I 'low to learn manners an' talk same as you do," he said, speaking directly to Mildred. "I 'low to become as ole Chris here is sed that I *kin* do—a man like the young bloods o' yo' city. I 'lows I won't make ye ashamed."

CHAPTER XXII

THE ULTIMATUM

TIDINGS of the Hallonquist engagement swept through Dunrobin like fire through a field of dry grain. There were few friendly comments. Sophie's thoughtless disdain of her elders had not tended to make her a popular figure, such as Mildred Gaither. Mary Hallonquist too, though widely termed "sweet," had not altogether escaped censure. She was known to be over-indulgent and weak where her daughter was concerned, and, in herself, was a bit too withdrawn and exclusive.

When added to these handicaps in the general approval, Miss Ossie now took on herself to stride up and down in Biblical roaring and raging, denouncing that "low-lived young coward-skunk of a Karl Trenham, and the what-all he's done to niece Mildred," the small town was soon in a ferment.

In vain did poor, horrified Mildred implore her rash aunt to keep silence—declaring such vulgar publicity was far worse than anything Cousin Karl had done. But for once the implacable mountain woman was deaf to the voice of her darling. Her sense of resentment, of fury and of vengeance was

rampant, and although she did not realize the fact, it was Miss Ossie Laird's bitterness of defeat that was being assuaged rather than a generous attempt to defend the unhappy Mildred.

"Oh, how I wish," the girl cried in despair, once when Uncle Chris chanced to be near her, "that I hadn't refused Henry Whiting! I would marry him now if he asked me again—I would—in a minute. I'd be willing to marry almost any one decent and kind just to stop Auntie's terrible gossip."

Mrs. Hallonquist fought her battles alone for three days, and then sent off a note by old Grief. It bore the address, "James Gaither, Esq." and was superscribed "personal and private."

"I cannot endure this great strain by myself any longer [the poor woman wrote, and her insecure pen-strokes attested to the truth of her words]. I must have some one to advise me. I've so far held my own against Sophie, but feel that my strength nears the end. Come as soon as you can, James. I need you. I'll be watching this evening. Please come.

Your distracted, unhappy old friend,

MARY HALLONQUIST."

After supper that evening, Mr. Gaither rose, pushed his chair to its place under the table and announcing curtly, "I'll be back in an hour or so," made his way from the house, and out through

the early spring twilight toward the Hallonquist cottage.

On the porch he had dimly discerned two huddled figures, when they sprang nimbly apart.

Sophie's giggle rang through the darkness. "Mother's in by the fire. I know you've come to see her, Uncle James," the engaged one cried out, with no further greetings. Karl had not moved nor spoken.

The visitor went in, and hearing him coming, Mary threw wide the dining-room door.

"Oh, I *am* glad that you've come! I began to think you *never* would. Shut both doors," she went on nervously. "There, that's right. If we speak low I'm sure they can't hear us. Oh, James—*James*—what on earth *shall* I do?"

She flung herself down to a chair, her gaze never leaving his face.

Gaither cleared a dry throat. He wished that she would not follow each step that he made with those wide, hunted eyes.

"Oh, James, James, what do you think has happened?" Mrs. Hallonquist began again, forcing the words. "She threatens that if I don't consent she'll—Sophie'll—*leave* me."

"You mean, run away and be married?" James queried, his eyes growing shrewder.

"Yes,—she used the terrible word more than once. She and Trenham have threatened to—*elope*."

"Are you sure that Karl threatened?" asked Gaither, and when Mary said "No" he looked intensely relieved.

"Then I wouldn't worry at all," he declared. "It is only a schoolgirlish menace to annoy you. The State laws will uphold you in opposing it. Sophie's a minor by more than a year; they can't get a license to marry."

"What do I care for *laws*!" the other exclaimed, "all I want is to prevent this disaster."

"And you are sure it would be a disaster?" Gaither demanded. "Karl is bound to succeed. He is frank and well-spoken. His business ability amounts to sheer genius, and he is steady in morals, as far as I know. He never misses church service, and——"

"Stop!" flamed Mary, her white cheeks turned to red. "I answer with just one small question. Would you want one of *your* daughters to marry Karl Trenham?"

Her friend's eyes fell away. "Well—of course—to be sure," he stammered, greatly embarrassed. Then, on a sudden, a small saving ray of memory found him. "You said it yourself, my dear Mary," he declared, "about God showing mercy to thousands that love him and keep His commandments."

"I remember, and I don't take back *one word* that I said. There is always a chance, and I truly believe in God's promises. But you never get over

the sense that it is only a *chance*—and I can't—no, and I *won't*," she cried vehemently, "have my one child take such a risk!"

Gaither hastily withdrew from the Scriptures. "Well," he said, "as we two were remarking a few weeks ago, the possession of daughters is not altogether conducive to tranquillity. I am having a queer time at home with one of my girls."

"Yes, poor Mildred; but of course, James, I'm sure it is all spiteful gossip—because Sophie says Karl——"

"This is not about Karl," Gaither laughed, and the sound made the other look up in amazement. "Quite a separate kettle of fish, I assure you. I presume Chris has told you, that his boyhood friend from the mountains, a Mr. Thigpen, has moved to Dunrobin?"

"No—no," Mary stammered, bending forward to stir up the coals. "I haven't seen Chris for an age——"

"Well, Thigpen is here," James declared with a smile. "And unless I am greatly mistaken, there are going to be fireworks soon that will make this wild talk about Sophie seem a mere flash in the pan."

"I was with Chris," he went on, "a few days ago when the two old friends met—the first time, I take it, since boyhood. That queer brother-in-law of mine, ordinarily so placid, almost wept, I give you my word, with excitement and rapture—

seeing which I could hardly do less than invite Mr. Thigpen to supper."

"To your *house*—to your *table*!" gasped Mary. "What *did* Miss Ossie say?"

"The gods were propitious," grimaced James. "Happily for us, my sister-in-law had already decided to keep to her room for that evening. But if Ossie had been there at that table——" The narrator made pause for a relishing chuckle.

"To get to the gist of my story," he continued, "it seems that our knight of the timbers was completely bowled over by Mildred. He fell in love at first sight, as it were neck and crop, and has made up his impudent mind that he'll win her."

"Such *incred-ible* boldness! A crude creature like that from the hills! What on earth did you say to the fellow, James?"

"There was nothing left for me to say," answered Gaither, with a humorous quirk of remembrance. "He stalked into my office, his head very nearly grazing the ceiling—got the amorous load off of his chest, grasped my hand in a way that has dislocated most of the joints of my fingers, and strode out with his chin in the air, leaving father-in-law faint and speechless."

"It *was* funny," Mary admitted, with a deprecatory laugh, "but I should think you'd be *fu-rious*."

"I suppose that I should," said Gaither, "but Ossie's rage, when it comes to her ears, will be quite enough for one family. As for me,—I'm not

angry at all. For Mary—you see,” he explained, his low pleasant voice taking on a tenderer cadence, “the young man thinks there is a—reason——”

His companion’s bright look of encouragement urged him to further confidence.

“It seems, all of his life he has lived with a dream—a clear vision of one whom he loved and could not attain, a girl older than he, who loved and was won by—another.”

“You don’t mean your *Lee-zer*?” Mary whispered, “your own gentle *Lee-zer*?”

“Yes,” he nodded, and could say no more for an instant.

“This *does* make a difference,” came the hushed, vibrant words to his ear. “Dear, dear friend—I am sure I shall love him; to hold to a memory like this all of his life until now he has met *Lee-zer*’s own daughter! It’s a perfectly *beau-ti-ful* story.”

“Well—well—well,” Gaither sighed, “let us return to our naughty young black sheep, your head-strong girl and my partner. Ah! I believe I’ve got it!” he triumphed. “What’s the matter with sending your young Juliet off to some school for a year?”

The faint hint of hope in Mary’s sensitive face died to ashes. “It’s the first thing I thought of. Oh, if only she *would* go! But she refuses even to *listen*.”

“It’s the one feasible plan,” James repeated.

"And the girl's got to listen. On my word! *She's* a colt that needs breaking. Shall I make the attempt to bring her to reason?"

"If you choose," the consent being given in a dull, desolate tone.

"Then I should say that the best possible move, as matters stand at the moment, is to summon our culprits in here."

Mary started, but forced back her quick words of protest.

"As I happen to be well aware," the speaker continued, ignoring all signs of agitation, "Trenham is not yet in a position to marry. The business is doing well, exceedingly well, as you know, but in some ways it is still a venture. Karl belongs to the new school of finance, and believes in big planning. In fact, my dear friend," he concluded, "I could almost affirm, before speaking to him, that you'll find he is entirely in sympathy with your wish to send Sophie to school."

James rose, rather briskly for him, and passed out into the porch.

This time Trenham sprang up. "What's the matter? Are you going now, Cousin James?" he asked in his usual frank, offhand way of speaking. "I was just getting ready to start."

"No, you weren't, you big story; and you know it!" an invisible Sophie cried out. "You always stay a lot later than this."

"No, Karl, I'm not leaving just yet," Gaither

said, without noticing his companion. "Mrs. Hallonquist and I want you young people to come indoors for a moment."

"Will I go? You watch me," Trenham exclaimed. "I've tried for three days to get a word with her. Here, kid, what are you doing?" he laughed, as he felt a sudden weight on his arm. "Don't you want to see Mother?"

"No, she's been too unkind; and I don't intend to go inside. They've been cooking up something in there. I don't want you to hear it," the girl said, striving hard to drag her lover back to the shadows.

"Really, Sophie!" Mr. Gaither began, but Karl smiled broadly. "Don't you worry, I'll bring her. Now, young lady, you come with me."

As the three entered Mrs. Hallonquist had never appeared more composed or more patrician. She looked straight at Karl.

"Good-evening," a steady voice greeted him, while a small hand was extended unusually far from its base. "I appreciate your prompt acquiescence, Mr. Trenham. Mr. Gaither, your cousin, will act as my spokesman. You will kindly listen to him."

"No, Karl, don't you do it!" came from somewhere behind.

After the farce of a handshake, Trenham had slowly withdrawn to the mantel, and with one elbow on the end of the shelf fell thoughtful and

silent. Further back, Sophie stood erect, watchful and rigid.

"Well, young man," James essayed to begin, and unconsciously took his place beside his hostess, "it seems you have played the dark *rôle* of the serpent in Eden. You have caused Mrs. Hallonquist here——"

"I've never wished or intended to cause Sophie's mother a moment of worry," Karl broke in. "Neither Sophie nor I have done anything we are ashamed of. If Mrs. Hallonquist will let me explain!"

"I really can't see anything to explain," Gaither smiled. "The apple-cart is over. But there's one thing you can do, to attest your sincerity."

"What is it?" Trenham asked quickly.

James told hurriedly of the mother's ultimatum—her insistence that Sophie be sent from Dunrobin, and Karl—for the space of a year.

The young man listened with all of the gravity due the occasion, while Sophie, her head poised more than ever like portraits of the Countess Potocka, flashed her great, brilliant eyes from one face to another, gathering fresh clouds of wrath in each nervous flight.

"Yes," said the spokesman in conclusion, "Mrs. Hallonquist thinks it's best for all persons concerned."

"I infer you are speaking of her absence for a year at school," Trenham caught at his meaning.

Gaither nodded. With a gasp, Sophie whirled to the centre and faced him.

"You are wasting your time. I simply *won't* go. That's all to be said. I'm no child!" she cried, loosing a whippet of anger. "To be talked over like this, and have my affairs settled. If you want to ignore *me*, Karl's opinion has some weight, I reckon!"

Trenham seemed not to hear. His pink face had grown sober. "Since you give me a voice in the matter," he said, his intelligent eyes turned to Mary, "I think it an excellent scheme. After all, Sophie is only a schoolgirl. This plan you propose will stop gossip. In fact, Mrs. Hallonquist," he bowed gracefully, "I am more than in accord with your wishes."

For a moment, the three had ignored a silent and shivering Sophie. She now faced him who she thought her false lover. "You *agree!*" she got out, on the first difficult breath of her fury. "You *want* me to be driven far off for a year where you never can see me! Oh, Karl—and you said just tonight, only a few minutes ago, that you couldn't bear me out of your sight!"

Karl looked decidedly sheepish. "I meant it too, Sophie," he smiled down to her tragic young face. "I really am crazy about you, but the truth is, you are only a kid and belong to your mother. Since she thinks it is best, why——"

"Hush,—not one other word!" the girl said,

in a tone of such crushed vibrant passion, that Mary put up a white tremulous hand to her eyes. "If *you* want to be rid of me—that ends it. You have won—all three of you," her glance swept cold scorn through the room. "You all have been heartless and cruel, and I'll never forgive you on earth!"

She tore from them in a whirlwind. Mary turned her sad face toward the door, which still shook from the violent slam the enraged one had given it.

"Mary, Mary," Gaither warned, stepping closer, "as she says, we have won. Karl has stood by us finely. Don't you turn chicken-hearted and spoil our victory."

"I!" cried the mother, her head very high. "You *must* think me weak and poor-spirited. I'm too thankful for things as they are. And, Mr. Trenham," she went on in the same well-poised manner, "I am sincerely indebted to you."

The little throat crumpled. One hand was flung out into space.

"James—I'm falling," she whispered. "I'm ill. Call Tempey—I must get to my room."

CHAPTER XXIII

THE RECONCILIATION

MRS. HALLONQUIST'S fainting attack was not long, but while it endured her daughter was terribly frightened. The long, inky burden that Tempey bore to the bed had the horrible silence of death.

The old servant went promptly about her task of restoration, using potent if old-fashioned methods, and once more proved her claim to the title of "the best sick-nurse in Dunrobin."

With Mary disrobed and arrayed in a fresh, snowy night-dress, her blue eyes half opened, and a delicate colour again in her cheeks, the triumphant attendant motioned Sophie aside.

"They ain't nothin' to fret about, honey," she whispered. "Yo' Ma is all right. What she needs now is jes' bein' quiet."

"But,—Mammy—what was it?" a whisper came back, through lips still pallid and trembling. "She looks awfully bad to me yet."

"Don't you b'leeve it," said Tempey. "Hit was only a spell of de tantrums. I has 'em myse'f, an' I knows."

In the sudden reaction from honest alarm, the

girl felt a renewed irritation. So her mother was trying to work on her pity! Well, Mother should see!

During the first afternoon of the mistress' withdrawal from domestic affairs, Karl arrived, only to be ignominiously shooed away by the irate old nurse.

"No, Miss Hallonquist, she ain't at home. She ain't nowhar erbout—she done sed so jes' now," the black fate repelled him. "My po' chile she ain't seein' no vis'ters at all, she's that awful tore up in her feelin's. Me an her, we is packin' to go off to school. *You* knows why, well ernuff!" she concluded dramatically, and slammed the front door in his face.

Karl waited until after the hour for the Hallonquist supper, and then reappeared.

This time, as Tempey confronted him, he smiled in his most ingratiating manner, and, half unclosing his right hand, showed her the gleam of a bright silver dollar.

"Now look here, Aunt Tempey, we're friends, you and I," he began with a smile that had won him hosts of feminine admirers. "And, if only——"

"Don't you projec' roun' me, wid yo' talk erbout frien's an' yo' teef all a-shinin' in rows lak an open pianner!" came forth as a blow on the chest. "An' what's mo'—you is wastin' yo' time wid you standin' dare slantin' yo' ole pewter dollar

wid a hawk on one side in my eye. You don't see my baby no mo', tell she says she's good an' ready to see you."

Again the door crashed within a few inches of young Lochinvar's nose, and he turned away cursing, yet smiling.

The following morning a note and a big box of chocolates and bon-bons were sent up from the drug store by Karl.

"Here,—you jes' hol' yo' horses, you long-laigged nigger," Tempey called out to the bearer, "an' don't you dare drap dat trash you is totin', an' run lak I sees you is fixin' to do. You wait till I axes de lady ef she's willin' to take what you's brung her."

The young lady most decidedly was not, and the grinning mulatto returned with both tokens of love unopened.

Trenham, though greatly chagrined, felt his ardour increase as his spirited sweetheart continued to flout and repel him.

When three days had gone, and the girl showed no signs of relenting, the young man bent every power of his quick, practical mind to the task of retrieving his lost position with Sophie.

The cunning device which he decided at last to try was that of sending a false wire to the cottage, designed to deceive; it was written out in Karl's hand in the telegraph office downtown, and despatched by a bribed and accredited messenger.

Sophie, believing it from the school to which she was going—this being exactly what Karl had hoped she would think—tore open and read:

“This Monday evening at five I shall be on the long road from the shot tower, at the corner of a certain small corn patch, beside the rail fence. I will wait fifteen minutes. If you are not there by that time, I’ll turn back on the road, and come into the town by a different way. If you don’t come at all, I will take it to mean that our friendship and all we have planned for the future are over, and I shall never willingly see you again.

Yours,

KARL.”

Sophie went.

CHAPTER XXIV

SOPHIE'S DEPARTURE

NOT risking delay by an instant, Sophie left home a little past four o'clock. With her buoyant and vigorous walking, the journey need take her at most a scant half hour.

Karl was waiting, and in his arms all of her pride and resentment melted away in a torrential freshet of tears. In a quivering ecstasy of reconciliation, she became timid, pleading, almost humble; and when her lover gently explained why he felt that her going to school was a thing to be done she no longer opposed him.

"Yes, darling, I see what you mean," she sobbed. "And I'll try to be patient and good. I know I've been horrid to Mother—but, Karl, it was you—only you!—and the calm way you agreed, when Uncle James said I should be sent so far off, that broke my heart."

"Poor, untried little heart," soothed the man, half teasingly, and yet with a touch of the real. "If I'm never to make it bear worse trials than this, we'll be lucky."

"Nothing could be much worse," Sophie wept. "A year—a whole black, endless year—and never

to see you! Why, Karl, don't it make you feel awful?"

"No. By Jingo! what's twelve months, after all? It will go before we're sure it has got here, and then—after that—comes a whole jolly lifetime together. So look up, little precious, and smile at your Karl, and then we'll go back to Mother."

Sophie strove to obey, and, in striving, appeared so entirely bewitching that the man caught her passionately in his arms, straining her tightly against him, and kissed her tear-wet lips, as though he could never be satiated with their tremulous sweetness.

"There!" he cried, holding her off, with a tender and masterful laugh, to see how she struggled for breath. "All the years in the world can't cool such kisses. And we're young, my beloved! Think of all the rapture before us!"

By Wednesday the arrangements for Sophie's rather untimely attendance at school were entirely complete, and when the hour of departure arrived, Karl drove up to the house, in what Sophie hysterically called a "funeral coach," lacking nothing but crêpe on the shabby whip-handle, and conveyed the two ladies to town.

Tempey and Grief had started an hour earlier, for the old man's bent legs did not carry him swiftly.

At Dunrobin's one "day-po" a concourse of friends and near-relatives were already assembled

as Chris plunged along the wooden platform toward the just-stopping carriage, with Alonzo a few paces behind. The two friends had rather the aspect of an intensely pleased showman convoying a handsome and amiable bear.

Mary Hallonquist felt Chris's coming, even before the big genial voice boomed out over Dun-robin's early spring hats.

"Howdy—howdy, Miss Mary. Hey, you-all over there by the carriage, hold on a minute. I'm a-bringin' 'Lonzo to show you."

Mary had no eyes for Alonzo. She was staring at Chris. Her face, always subtly imbued with the expression artists give their madonnas, held the rapt, upward gaze of a saint—but a saint dolorosa.

Chris had never appeared more carefree, more entirely content. His eyes were grey, sunken stars of excitement; and his smile like a shaft of pink sunlight on rock.

Mrs. Hallonquist did not at all realize that during this almost hypnotic preoccupation, Karl had assisted her down from the carriage, and that she now stood at the edge of a throng which parted in the long fissure of a composite smile. They were making way for the towering mountaineers who, reaching her, came to a pause, and stood hanging above her like cliffs.

"This is 'Lonzo," said Chris, in the voice a devout early Christian might have used in declaring, "This is Peter." "He's my very best friend.

Step up, 'Lonzo, make your best scrape, and bow to Miss Mary."

"I'm most *happy* to meet Mr. Thigpen," Mary murmured, extending a delicate, gloved hand, where the tip of one finger showed pink through a place needing darning. "In fact," she affirmed, in a slightly raised tone, her head tilted back till the blue, praying eyes could meet those of Alonzo, "I feel that I know you already—Chris has talked of you so very much."

'Lonzo smiled and bowed as instructed. "He is talked both my years stiff 'bout you," the mountain-eer gallantly tossed back the ball of complaisance.

"You must make Mr. Laird bring you to call on me soon," Mary continued, without daring to meet Chris's direct gaze.

"We are aiming to drop in tonight," Chris observed, though no one had asked him.

'Lonzo bowed again. "I'll be proud to be taken, Miss Mary. You see," he smiled, speaking with a hint of unusual shyness, "I'm plumb druv' for to call you 'Miss Mary' since this old ostrich here with his head amongst the beetles ain't never once named me your other."

"Yes—*please* call me Miss Mary," that sweet person fluttered. "I like it—from *you*, Mr. Thigpen. Do you *promise*?"

"You can count on me now and forever, Miss Mary."

The train was heard coming. All activities began to centre about the young person so soon to depart.

Tempey, raising her head, beat about at the edge of the crowd like a troubled balloon broken off from its string, and bumping the ceiling. After a moment, some understanding white friend gave the old servant entrance, whereupon she rushed for the half-bewildered Sophie, crying out through her tears, "Oh, my baby—Mammy's baby! Dey is gwine take my baby away!"

Old Grief, checked midway in the throng, worked his shuffling steps nearer Mary, and afterward kept to the spot, his bleared, faithful eyes not once leaving her.

Miss Finger, with a few sprigs of rosemary (for remembrance, my dear) clutched in one cotton glove, a novel—"The Wooing O't" in the other hand, drove the thin wedge of herself toward the traveller, extending her gifts.

Sophie thanked her, and took what she did not perceive, for, to her own tremulous wonder, a sob in her throat had distended the satiny surface and her eyes were blinded by tears.

She looked about wildly—not for Letty, nor for Karl—but for one slender woman who stood with a hand pressing hard to her breast. Sobbing loudly, the girl groped her way toward Mary.

"Mother—*Mo*-ther! I just cannot leave you! I shall die! I nev-nev-never dreamed it would be so

ferocious! Oh, hold me—put your arms tight around me. I can't get on that train."

Karl practically carried his sweetheart up the steps of the Pullman, while the mother, her arms still hot and vital with that last agonized clasp, watched the scene with a face like one cut in chalk.

"Now, Miss Mary," warned Chris in a whisper, "it ain't no good fainting—the train's starting. All the folks is a-gazing toward you."

Mary lifted her head. "Thank you, Chris, I'll remember."

"There, she's waving," cried the mountaineer in wild excitement. "She's waving, Miss Mary. She's stuck through the window plumb on her stomach. Gorrry-midey!" he puffed, "I sure hope that black man what I tipped half a dollar is got a tight hold on the end we can't see! What's the matter you ain't waving back to your daughter?" he demanded indignantly. "Oh, I see, your handkerchief is dripping. Here, take mine. Golly-marster! it never is there when I want it! Here you, 'Lonzo!" Then springing toward that amazed person, Chris began frantically clawing in Alonzo's vest pockets.

Thigpen gave a quick cry and swerved nimbly. "Stop; you tickles! What in God's name are you grabblin' me for, before all these peoples?"

"Handkerchief, quick, before she gets out of sight!" Chris implored him.

In one long flash of red, 'Lonzo drew from his hip a large cloth that might cover a table.

"Here, Miss Mary—wave now—wave like hell!" Chris encouraged, lifting one of the woman's flaccid hands, and inserting a corner of the handkerchief. "There, she sees you! She's waving back hard. I do hope," he once more muttered, "that that black porter-man is attending to business."

Suddenly 'Lonzo bent down to Chris's ear. "Lookout there, your Miss Mary is blanching, and I think that off leg's giving way. Air you ready to grab her?"

Chris threw a dark look, the darkest he had ever turned on Alonzo. "Here, you crawl in your own shell, old gopher. I can look after Miss Mary. Milly's waiting out there on the edge of the crowd for to see you. I've looked after Miss Mary some years before you came to Dunrobin, and I'm aiming to keep up the practice. Farewell, don't you fret none about Miss Mary."

CHAPTER XXV

THE HURRYING YEAR

AND now Sophie was actually gone. For the round of the four changing seasons, the place of her birth was to see and to hear her no more. The meticulous, self-absorbed, and absorbing routine of the village closed in, as elastic blue ether in the wake of one vanishing swallow.

The allotted "nine days" for the wonder of Sophie and Karl's engagement had not more than half been attained, when it was promptly forgotten in a new and more imminent romance, that of Alonzo Thigpen and Mildred Gaither.

There were strange fragments of gossip that went darting about, to tell of Miss Ossie Laird's hot anger against such a flinging away of her lovely niece on that "gleamin'-eyed, long-bodied catamount down from the mountains."

Mr. Thigpen, the same rumour said, presented an armour of smiles and impervious good-nature to the fierce lady's verbal assaults; while Mildred, torn between the tempestuous will of her aunt, and a swift-growing pride in her picturesque lover, had about given up, and decided to be ill in bed, till the storm had calmed down.

'Lonzo's wooing, and its success, were for Chris an obsession. He thought, dreamed, connived for, and discoursed of naught else. It was as if, by his fervour, he determined to cancel the effect of his sister's unmeasured hostility.

The hurrying year passed along, and in the middle of February, about three weeks before Sophie's scheduled arrival, Mildred Gaither was married to 'Lonzo.

What magic of pleading the young bride-elect had been inspired to bestow upon her aunt, the curious world of Dunrobin was never to puzzle out. The result was sufficient, for, there at the wedding, in the very front pew, stiff and upright, and rustling with silk like a corn-patch in winter, Ossie sat when the church-doors were opened, her eyes dry and hard as grey stone.

This sight brought the first nervous, intimate thrill to a gathering already expectant.

Next in general surmise was the whispered conjecture, "How *do* you suppose that wild mountaineer is going to act when the service begins?"

For those curious and slightly malicious observers who hoped to enjoy some spectacular crudeness chagrin was in store.

Alonzo, content and serene—upheld on the tide of his rapture—had eyes that were fastened on Milly as steel to its compelling pole. The girl had never before looked so lovely. It was radiant

joy, not a mere flower-like face, that the white cloud of veiling revealed.

So much for the bridegroom Alonzo—but alas for his “best man”—poor Chris!

There was no tide of rapture to bear him along on its surface. His huge clumsy frame, enclosed for the occasion in a sombre Prince Albert, seemed the person of somebody else. The long fuzzy tails were eternally flapping about, and demanding a constant jerk and clutch to assure him they were still attached and not escaping. In the left lapel of his coat a gardenia had been thrust—a bloom unfamiliar to Chris,—with a strong perfume which made him quite ill. Worse than this, he’d been told by at least five different persons that on no account must he touch it, or its delicate petals would blacken.

All day long, this bewildered and prodded large man, was flung from one task to another, until now, by evening, though the wind had grown chill, his face was purple and lacquered with moisture.

As Alonzo and his best man stepped forth, Chris felt fully convinced that the eyes of the entire congregation were fixed on his waistcoat alone. He knew that one button was straining hard—and with his last agonized heaving of resignation—he felt that it burst from its moorings. In the light of this knowledge, he held in his breath and his contours till his face grew the colour of a beet.

As the wedding party again faced the congrega-

tion, and a head-hung and exquisite Mildred made her way out on her tall husband's arm, she suddenly caught sight of Miss Ossie. Breaking away from Alonzo, she ran, in the sight of all eyes, to fling snow-white arms around the thin rigid figure.

"Oh, you dear, blessed Auntie," she whispered, while tears of sheer joy fell on rustling silk, "don't think I don't realize what this coming has meant to you, dearest. I shall never forget it on earth. You're my own precious mother, and I don't care one bit what you think of my husband—I'll love you exactly the same."

The small church which had seemed so enormous to Chris was gradually emptied. The echo of voices floated out the front door, like the trail of a thin perfumed scarf. The warmth and the colour had slowly receded, and the space was deserted except for one stiff upright figure. All at once the scrawny neck bent, and the new hat went down to the railing.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE LONELY HEARTH

MARCH blew in; and the date Mary dreaded—the old date of the Hallonquist fire—was well in the past. Three days more, and Sophie would reach her.

Mary often wondered where the young people would live after the wedding. Not once had Karl given a hint as to his plans for the future. Partly due—it may be—to this silence on Trenham's part, Mrs. Hallonquist came to believe that Karl was possessed of the same sort of manly and unchartered largeness as 'Lonzo. For it seems that when James Gaither suggested that Milly and her husband spend their first year in the old home, the mountaineer smiled and shook his head.

"No, Mr. Gaither," he replied when faced with the question. "We both thanks you kindly. But Milly an' me we's talked it all over together, and we would rather have—me an' Milly—" here his flaming dark eyes sent a passionate message of love to the girl on his arm, "a small coop of our own, even if it's just one room an' a washtub."

Letty, who sometimes ran in to cheer up Sophie's mother, had recounted this scene of prenuptial ar-

rangements. Mary speculated as to why the trivial story produced an effect so warm and comforting.

"Yes," she mused, when Letty had gone, "it is what every woman should have; and if there is no 'Lonzo' to give it, then she ought to secure the 'small coop' herself."

The blue, gentle eyes drifted happily around to her walls and to their hangings, to dear possessions that had been all her very own during the year just past. Each picture hung just as her fingers had left it.

"Milly's husband is right," she softly repeated. "A home all her own is due to each woman. It gives us self-respect and an unfailing interest that no other material values can give. Yet—I *do* hope," she smiled in the twilight, "that Karl won't choose a place *too* far off from this cottage of mine."

Trenham drove the girl up in the same musty "funeral coach" which twelve months before had driven the three to the train.

Mrs. Hallonquist stood in the sunshine to welcome the traveller. The meeting threatened to be slightly formal, until Sophie suddenly rushed back for a second embrace, crying, "Mother—poor little Mother! I can see by your face how you've suffered in having me gone this whole year. Your hair is right grey at the temples—and somehow you look so much older. But to me you seem sweeter than ever."

The need for beginning Sophie's autumn trousseau was in Mary's heart and conscience, therefore the delighted Miss Pearlie Perky was retained for two days in each week to fashion the wedding garments, for the ceremony scheduled for a Wednesday in November.

Midsummer passed into autumn. Early mists hung like dreams over Dunrobin, disappearing with the gold of each day, and returning with the whisper of nightfall.

As yet no plans for the young couple's abode after marriage had been hinted to Mary. This intentional avoidance of the subject, as it now began to appear, greatly troubled the mother. It made her both restless and anxious.

Surely her part was nearly over. She had given consent after agonized struggles to the marriage itself; she was spending her all on heaps of clothes for her daughter, and the showy church-wedding that Karl and Sophie both urged. Her reward—there was no use to hide it—was to return to peace and complete possession of her cottage, to a personal fireside.

Karl Trenham arrived one night about eight o'clock to spend the evening as usual with Sophie. As usual also, Mrs. Hallonquist, after a few pleasant, unmeaning remarks, excused herself, and withdrew to her room with a book.

The novel proved far from engrossing. Through its rather dull pages Mary heard from across the

hall the sound of gay voices. Now Karl laughed aloud. The listener shrank. She had never liked Trenham's laughter. Then the silvery cadence of Sophie's answering mirth sent fresh joy through the echoes. Next came the bang of doors flung apart.

In a moment more—forgetting her mother's injunction to knock before entering, Sophie rushed into the room, and threw herself down on her knees beside the reader.

"It's all settled!" she cried, her eyes bright with excitement. "And I know you'll die with delight—for we're going to live with *you*. Karl decided! He is not willing I should leave you alone, Mother dear, and he thinks it best for his business not to put any money into a house just at first. But he's going to build us a bath, and a big dressing-closet off the trunk-room. Oh, isn't it too delicious!"

Mary Hallonquist said not a word. At her silence, and a quick nervous start that was followed by instant rigidity, Sophie drew back a little.

"Why, Mother! what on earth is the matter?" she exclaimed. "You're turning as white as a sheet! I ought not to have told you the good news so abruptly. I know you're not as young as you were, poor dear little Mother. But Karl says you'll grow young and happy again when we come here to live, and you see us so utterly blissful. Karlie says it's high time anyway that I learned

to keep house, so after I'm a settled old married lady you must just lean back in your chair, and I shall run everything. There—the colour is trying to come again, and your eyes are looking more natural. Kiss me, dear little Mother, for I must hurry. That absurd boy he nearly goes mad if I stay out of the room for five minutes. Good-night, and the sweetest of dreams to the sweetest of mothers.”

She ran from the room, joy and youth flying with her like banners.

Mary put down her book, then rose very slowly. She crossed to a window and ran the shade high, looking upward, as if she expected to see once again drifting clouds and the crest of tall tree-tops. But all she now faced was new darkness.

The shade was pulled down by a hand that moved stiffly, in jerks, as if it belonged to a manikin. She retraced her slow steps by the same awkward inches, until striking the side of her bed she came to a shivering pause and there sank to a heap of inertia. One arm was flung over the covers, the other trailed down in a curve to the floor. Her bowed head hung between them.

“Must I drink this cup too?” she was moaning, though her white lips were dumb. “Will life leave me nothing at all?”

CHAPTER XXVII

A WEDDING AND A JOURNEY

A FULL page of Dunrobin's *Daily Democrat* was given over to an account of the Trenham-Hallonquist wedding. The romantic Miss Sally Finger, who was known at times to dip into Journalism had been given the congenial task of "covering" the iridescent function.

It is but just to state that not only was the "covering" achieved, but that it ran molten in eulogy. The columns reeled with laudatory adjectives and bristled with exclamation points.

The fair bride blushed—on paper, not in fact. Fidgety, conventional Aunt Baring frowned to see with what a free step and roving eye the newly-made Mrs. Trenham swept down the aisle on her beaming husband's arm.

The young girl's orange-blossoms were held high indeed; and why not, since she was now married to the one man in the world for her? According to Sophie's code, the opinions of outsiders were of less concern than the broken flowers upon which she was then treading.

Since the affair had been, to quote Miss Sally's

phrasing, "an event in the *crème de la crème* of fashion," it took place at eight o'clock p. m.

The crowded church display was followed by a reception at the bride's home, after which, "close on the mystic hour of midnight," again adopting the words of the reporter, "the stalwart, handsome groom, bearing upon his arm his sweet and girlish wife, led her out to the carriage which soon whirled the happy pair to the railroad depot. There they took train for New York, in which historic spot their honeymoon will be passed.

"Friends and relatives of Mr. and Mrs. Trenham may expect to see them back in about two weeks, when the young couple will take up their residence in the picturesque cottage of the bride's mother, the still youthful and lovely Mrs. Dudley Hallonquist, so well known to all her circle as Mary Baring."

About a fortnight before the wedding day, masons and carpenters, with their corroborative piles of brick and timber, had appeared at the west side of the trunk-room.

The faint clean odour of yellow pine which once, to Mary, had been specially delightful, now, as an hourly reminder of her approaching bondage, became intolerable. Each nail that went relentlessly to its allotted place made one negation the more in the last personal hope the widow had concealed.

The sounds of hammer, saw and grating brick,

daily persisting, roused Tempey to a new burst of prophecy.

"What I dun tole you, man?" she asked of the instantaneously wary and apprehensive Grief.

"What I dun dremp an' seen, but jes' dis here spurt of buildin'? Yes, I knows dis is patchin'," she went on, as Grief showed no alertness to respond, "but dey is jes' de start of de sho' nuff buildin' what is comin' atter awhile. Ya-a-s, Lawdy—hit is drawin' near. I feels hit fum far-away. Dat big house gwinter rise, jes' lak I tole you——"

As the phrases grew, Tempey's turbaned head began to sway, and her voice caught the rhythm of half-barbaric chanting. "Yes, Lord," Cassandra boomed, echoing her own words, "I ain't dremp dreams, an' seen an' smelt visions all fer nothin'. De Reverind Drake, he sez, as how he aint ex-pe'iunced nothin' mo' sancterfied hisself."

Grief, resting his bones on the usual low stool, furtively reached down, and halfway round himself, stretching his stiff leg by inches, until he could extract from the rear pocket of his shapeless trousers a corncob pipe, his joy, and Tempey's detestation.

The moment had been too propitious to be wasted, for his wife bent far over a flour-bin into the wall, and was counting out by cupfuls her need for a new setting of her famous bread. Rising, she lifted the filled dishpan and started back to the kneading-table.

Alas for Grief, the stiff leg, still protruding, got in the bearer's way. She stumbled, screamed, and then by a marvel of dexterity and balance rescued the pan from falling to the floor.

This near escape made her quick anger to flare. "Look what you mos' done," she scowled upon him. "An' all for reachin' atter dat rancid pipe. How, in Gawd's name, is I to see visions an' smell de sawin of dem Cedars of Lebun whilst you is settin' dar a-puffin' on a j'int of an ole mule's tail?"

Grief suddenly and most unexpectedly sat up. Tempey's eyes widened. It was as if the stone on which she battened her clothes was to shrink aside and leave her beating the air.

"Ef hit war dat big, bawlin' nigger preacher, young Pig Drake, a-drawin' on dis same good pipe up in his pulpik," Grief declared with slow impressive bitterness, "you an' all de udder fool sistren of de church dey'd say hit was de bref of cher'bimbs, what jes' bin eatin' peppermints. But urcose bein' as I ain't nothin' but yo' lawful wedded wife——"

He paused and sank back to a heap of silent resentment.

Tempey, after a struggle with her conscience, which told her to defend her spiritual leader, the Rev. Pig Drake, burst into deep laughter.

"You sure is jealous of dat holy man!" she chuckled, not without satisfaction. "But how

many times mo' is I got to tell you dat you ain't my wife? I's yourn, an' you's my husbin."

Grief's obstinacy grew. "Don't de Good Book declar'," he challenged, "dat place whar Paul is layin' de law round, dat wives is dem what nachally sub-mits deyselves to dey husbins? Answer me dat."

"Ya-a-as," Tempey conceded, after a troubled pause. This "argifying" was not at all like Grief.

Emboldened by the unwonted timidity of his better half, the old man drew himself erect, and fixed eyes that he hoped were stern on the offender.

"Sub-mits!" he bellowed hoarsely.

"Yas, I done heared. I ain't deaf o' hearin'," Tempey retorted rather fretfully.

"Den' if you heerd," Grief continued relentlessly, "jes' you thinks back, an' see when you ever is submitted yo' fat se'f to me."

Tempey gave it up, and worked her puzzled thoughts into the acrid dough, while Grief, triumphant, voiced his thankfulness that "atter Miss Sophie's ma-aige, dey'd be annuder man under dish-here female roof."

Yes, Grief, henpecked and blackened shard of masculinity though he was, had fibres left in him that cried out in gladness to know that another man—and not a mere parcel of woman-tyrants—would rule in the home he humbly served.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE RETURN OF THE LION

KARL and Sophie returned "on the dot," as the young husband said, and the whole of Dunrobin, except only Miss Laird, gave them welcome and hearty good-will in their new life together.

The trunk-room addition proved a success. It so delighted the couple that Trenham suggested an entire fresh coat of paint for the house; a much needed improvement which all along had been greatly desired by the owner, but had to be given up because other and more pressing demands had used up her last dollar.

Inferring of course that her son-in-law meant to assume the expense of the painting, she gave smiling consent. Light, impractical colours were selected, the work skilfully done, and the bill for the whole sent to one Mrs. Mary B. Hallonquist.

It was impossible for Sophie's mother to at once meet the new, unforeseen liability; and it cast the first shadow of fear upon this three-cornered manner of life. To Mary, dishonour and debt were twin furies, and to give Karl and Sophie the

"swell" wedding upon which they insisted had very nearly wiped out her small bank account.

A full week had passed since the Trenham homecoming, when Sophie was sent to her mother with the uncomfortable message, "Mother, Karl wants to know, whether you will think it quite enough for his share of the expenses, if he gives you the same board he used to pay Miss Abby Quigley?"

Mary winced at the graceless term "board," and murmuring something that Sophie might take for assent, turned away, vaguely shamed and embarrassed. As for Mrs. Karl's "board," it was not even thought of—at least by the married pair, who started life determined above all things to "get on."

The results of vicarious bliss upon Mary Hallonquist showed no symptoms of being fulfilled as time hurried by. Instead, day by day she grew more languid, the reins of domestic government slipped speedily into the hands of her daughter, with never so much as a feeble jerk of remonstrance.

Chris Laird a few days before the return of the Trenhams had, without a word of warning, gone somewhere "up North." His employers, Messrs. Page & Youngblood, asserted that it was the very first holiday he had asked for, since he came to their firm, now some twenty years past.

Where the traveller went, not even his idol Alonzo had been told. Miss Ossie grew angry when questioned, thus showing her ignorance. There

was in the small town, however, one stricken soul who believed that she knew why he went, and for what romantic purpose.

It was so like the man—like this Chris who could never discuss his deep, personal feelings—to slip off quietly and join Miss Lycosa. The two, after an unadvertised wedding—and a honeymoon such as no other woman could possibly know, being with Chris—would return to their home. The desire to keep his plans private was, of course, the traveller's real reason for sending no letters, not even to his old friend.

"So he'll be married when Dunrobin sees him again," the sick woman mused, while great tears swelled and pushed through her lashes. "Oh, how I hope my dear Chris will be happy," she prayed, beginning a weak, supine sobbing. "Oh, God—*help* me to mean it, when I say that I want happiness for *both*, and not for Chris alone."

Chris returned—unexpectedly too—a few weeks before Christmas. No one was warned of his coming, and he carried the key of his den in his vest-pocket.

His train puffed in at four o'clock of a late afternoon, and a sun made of copper newly scoured gave a last knowing wink as it drew down beneath the tumbled blue covers of hills for the night.

The man's first thought was to bolt for Miss Mary's. Through the long, glowing weeks of aloofness, he had never been rid of a certain small gnaw-

ing of conscience. He yearned to be sure that she harboured no grievance against him. Perhaps this time he really could tell her what a recognized naturalist and writer he had become.

When the reeling old phaëton driven by Uncle Daddy between the Dunrobin station and the houses of the quality at last stopped at his gate, Chris allowed the old man to assist in "totin" the heavier articles to the foot of the steep kitchen stairs, paid him off, and had partly ascended that squeaking incline, when Ossie from out of a window caught sight of the half-crouching figure.

She rushed down crying, "Bud—Bud! Oh, Buddy! It ain't really you!" her voice like a girl's with excitement. Her greeting touched Chris to the verge—and to the escapement—of big, happy tears.

"Lord! I plumb didn't know," he got out, swallowing hard to keep steady, "that you cared for me ever like this—so severe."

"Nor me neether!" sobbed Ossie, her thin cheeks drenched with joy. "It's because, you young scamp, you never ain't left me before. I lacked having a measure for caring."

Chris had stooped for the parcels set down at his feet, when he first heard his sister approaching. A few were regained, but now, at the break in Sis's tone, he flung them aside, and they sullenly bumped to the floor as he caught her again to his

arms, compressing a chest, already too flat, to a palpitant wafer.

"You—you—don't aim to be going out any—right away?" Ossie stammered, as soon as her speech came again. "James and Letty must see you at supper. You won't go before then? Say you won't—to please Sis."

After the shortest of struggles, Sis won.

It is safe to assert that the hour ensuing—a space during which Ossie had the delicate tact to see he was left quite alone—proved, to Chris, the most beatific, the most ample and filled with content, of any he ever had known.

He looked all about him at first, as if a little bewildered. Grey eyes blinked, but the light was within. The man could scarcely believe these many treasures to be his alone—held in silence, inviolate, faithful, until his return. From one swinging cocoon to its neighbour he moved very softly, the big hand upraised that a finger might give its prehensile and savouring touch.

All of the water left in a box of grass and earth near the window had vanished. He stared down, wondering darkly whether any small "critter" had perished because of the too-scant store.

Leaning over his bait-gourd, he saw that the tiny white pearls there imbedded had hatched, and were now wandering larvæ. This meant he must down to his knees—the plaid trousers with which

he had intended to emulate and dazzle 'Lonzo forgotten. Through great dust-piles of papers he searched—under bed and bureau and table. As a new slimy truant was captured, the naturalist felt as a miser who discovers yet another gold coin in a crack.

Again on his feet, the huge, gentle person paced his small, quiet demesne. Not a step could he take until his keen eyes had first swept the floor clean for his coming. Who knew what wee, partly developed "bug-critter" might lie in his elephant path?

Having thus renewed touch with his household, Chris turned next to the core of his inner being—a record of all the dear years, his old Memory Book.

The white pages filled of themselves, the writer only needing to pause now and then for a deep, happy chuckle.

When the supper bell rang, Chris jumped to his feet. "Gorry-midey!" he cried. "And I ain't even changed my train collar! Well, Ossie won't care for this once."

He was correct in the daring conjecture, for the sister still quivered with joy at his presence, and James and Letty followed suit. Indeed, the traveler had a hard time to make his escape but finally doing so, ran up the stairs, assuring himself *sotto voce*, "I must go to Miss Mary right away. I oughtn't to finish that sentence I broke in the

middle. I'm sure not to forget what comes after—leastwise I hope that I won't."

But on reaching his room, and seeing the book and his pen invitingly spread as he had left them, Chris gave a short groan of regret at his moral weakness, and telling himself, "Just this one page, and then I'll go," he sat down to the desk.

CHAPTER XXIX

CHRIS IS "GOARDED"

IT was about ten of the clock that same evening when a queer ping and tinkle made Chris lift his faraway gaze. He had been writing at length, and with deep, reminiscent enjoyment, the account of a great New York function at which he, of all men, had been the recognized lion.

"I kept thinking," he wrote," if only Sis Ossie could be standing here now, for to see for herself what a fuss these big folks at the North are making over her no-count young brother. And I longed too for poor Ma, but without her neuralgy or her stocking."

A second sharp, small detonation here came hard on the heels of the first.

The penman scowled blackly when the third pebble struck clear, on a pane of the far window.

Rushing to the spot, he threw the sash up, and was instantly greeted, from darkness below, "Hey there, Chris—you old 'possum up there in your crotch of the tree!—is your door on the open?"

"'Lon-zo!" shrieked Chris, all impatience forgotten. "Yes, it's open. Come right up, you old

varmint, or I'll fall down them steps for to hyste you."

'Lonzo's long legs made four bites at the stairs, and in he strode, like a sergeant who has run a deserter to earth.

"Well, I see that at last you are back," the visitor remarked, with a curious, latent resentment.

Chris, the lion, felt sparks in his mane.

"I had thought so myself, until now," he retorted. "But I allow I mayhaps was mistaken."

The irony flew by Alonzo, an arrow sped wide of its mark. He stood still, his dark eyes set on Chris, in a way that produced keen discomfort.

"What's ailing you, man?" that scrutinized victim protested. "Standing up there with two big, smoking lamps in your head?" And as 'Lonzo refused him an answer, continued more vehemently, "And how-cum you feel called on to bust into my vigils, a-glaring at me like a hant?"

"I got reasons," the other replied, darkly mysterious. "It air bad news. It relates to—Miss Mary."

Chris's bold front fell away as a mask. He threw a hand sidewise, and began feeling round, as a man newly blinded. Encountering the back of his desk-chair, he lowered himself to the seat.

"Miss Mary," he whispered. "Miss Ma-ry! Speak it, man—quick. I'm anguished to hear."

Alonzo's clear-cut face softened, but he forced the scowl again to his brow.

"First, you tell me just this, how long air you been from her side?"

"From whose side?—from Miss Mary's? I don't rightly belong to her side, or no other woman's," Chris remonstrated with some courage.

"Ye've been away five weeks. Five lonely weeks," accused Alonzo. "And how many-a letter have you written?"

"That air none of your business. You tell me that thing you was starting to tell about Miss Mary," blustered Chris, getting up to his feet, and striding toward his companion.

"Then hear it," said 'Lonzo, "and know you have done it yourself. She air pining away, Milly says. She is flitting like gals of the hills, such as we have seen, when they are taken with long mountain sickness. Milly goes there, she's one of the few that Miss Mary will see. Milly says," he went on with the torture, "that a'ready she's white as the snow what's just fell on a grave."

Chris stood rigidly still, and each word his friend flung toward him struck as a blow.

"Her sickness had really begun with pining for you," 'Lonzo continued, and the compelling gaze set on Chris dared him to oppose the statement. "But it got mighty much worse, from the minute them brass-banded Trenhams—the scarrapins both—come back home to the old lady's house, and just nachally shelved her."

"But they couldn't. It's Miss Mary's own house

—what is tied to her, tight as a wart, by the law. I saw to it and fixed it," said Chris.

"What protection is law against such a hustler as that Trenham?" asked 'Lonzo. "His one law is to grab all he can."

"I can't believe it," groaned Chris.

"But it's true." 'Lonzo paused for an instant. "Now let's get to the p'int and no shirking."

"Who's shirking?" cried Chris, with guilty swiftness.

"We soon is to see," 'Lonzo remarked. "I s'pose you don't think I know why you got out of town so darn quick, right after Sophie's wedding?"

"Anybody is welcome to know why I went," Chris began.

"Steady there," warned 'Lonzo. "All your life you've been thinking you doted and worshipped Miss Mary, and then the minute you had the chance for to get her—why, you ran like a sheep from a dog."

"I didn't! Ain't you 'shamed, 'Lonzo Thigpen, to be speaking so light of a lady? It ain't nowise respectful."

"You mean she don't care for you—thataway?"

"I mean *that*," Chris replied, on a lilting feverish hope. If only 'Lonzo would go, and leave him in peace with his writing.

"You air sure?" the inquisitor prodded. "And you give me your word to that fact?"

Chris's hope broke, with the sound and the quiver of a child's toy balloon in the air.

"I'm as sure as a fellow can be, about a thing what he can't be plumb sure of," he fenced with adroit circumlocution; and then, before his friend's silent scorn, he protested, "but Miss Mary *couldn't* care. Just you cast your eyes over me, 'Lonzo—cast both your eyes. Don't you see I'm as ugly as sin, and more clumsy?"

"Yes, I see," Thigpen assented quickly, "but in your old bachelor innards you knows that the poor woman dotes on you."

"But I tell you she *don't!*" Chris exclaimed, showing symptoms of tears.

"It's queer what women can love," 'Lonzo continued, ignoring his companion's distress. "Just—for instance—see me and my sweet one. How in Gawd's name that angel can care—— Look here, Chris," he broke in, leaning far forward, "without you love and air wedded, all you gets is the peelings of life—just the rinds—and no savour of sweet fruit within."

"But s'posing a fellow *likes* peelings," the unmarried man burst forth, then paused and looked sheepish.

"Now we got it," triumphed Alonzo in a tone of conviction. "And it's just what I thought all along. You is worse scared of marriage than a sick kitten is scared of a well. You don't want to take care of Miss Mary, to comfort and cherish her

none, poor little lonely small lady. I'm done," he cried, springing up to his feet. "Fare ye well. We may meet before long at your Miss Mary's funeral—you damn selfish bachelor skunk, that you is. After this I'll feel pizen to greet you."

Chris took this last insult in silence. Indeed, the wretched man was so dazed that nothing coherent could enter his agonized mind. He failed to perceive that Thigpen had stopped just without the one door of his room. The panel moved softly; one eye of Alonzo appeared.

"That is, you poor fool, you'll be pizen until you have writ as you should to that sweet sainted soul what adores you."

Now the swift racing steps brushed the stairway and vanished.

The sorely tried Chris—feeling, somehow, a hint of vague comfort at his visitor's last speech—cowered down in his chair. Later, he threw himself onto the bed with face hidden from all of his treasures.

He sought the old pipe, but even that friend failed to comfort. Then he paced to and fro—still a lion—but one in a cage. And the curious phase of his torment was that he knew well, all the time, that soon he would write to Miss Mary.

Once again he performed a slow, solemn round among his cocoons and bug-critters. His eyes held the tears of farewell. Once again he patted the sides of his Memory Book, after which, replacing

the tome to its nook of safe hiding, he got out some paper and wrote:

"DEAR MISS MARY,

This beginning looked cold. He tilted his shaggy head backward to view it, and sighed deeply. "I'd better not make it too vigorous, until I find out what she likes. That long-legged tanner from yan," he referred to his once worshipped Alonzo, "don't know everything down in Judee." At this thought the mournful face lightened, but it proved merely a rift in the clouds.

"I came back only this evening at sunset [he went on with his missive]. I had surely intended to go to your house the minute I had swallowed my supper, and I hurried upstairs for my coat, but I just had to finish one line of some writing that the supper bell broke in the middle—and when I got started I did not have sense enough to stop.

About ten, Lonzo Thigpen, who had heard I was back from my visit, he chunked up some rocks at my window, and then told me the terrible news of your being so ailing, and still are.

I am asking you now, dear Miss Mary, to give me the right to take care of you ever. There ain't been, and won't never be any woman for me, since that first time I saw your sweet face when I vaulted the fence of the Rectory garden, that time I was chasing a spider, which turned out to be the first species of the genus *Lycosa* I had ever seen.

I had given up all thoughts of being wedded like

other men—specially Lonzo. More than once you have made me to know—or I thought so—that a friendship was all that you would wish. I had grown content with that too, having fixed up my den as I wanted, and knowing no lady, not even one so willing as you, would let me keep spiders and beetles, and lately I'm adding some caterpillars and a few fighting wasps, the latter of which, I'm inclined to agree with the great naturalist Fabre, are almost the queerest of all. Though I'm bound to tell you that caterpillars are wonderful too, in their way, especially that variety called the Processional Caterpillar of the Pines. I could show you one of these processions some day, if you could bring yourself to take real interest.

Lonzo made me believe what I never have thought for myself, that maybe you cared for me just a little. I now offer myself—all my heart and my love—and I want to take care of you, dear Miss Mary; but I am sorry to say there is not much else to offer. Like a fool I took most of my savings and went up North like a selfish pig, and had a good time on the money all alone by myself, and nobody with me. But if you will make me the happiest of men, dear Miss Mary, I will never spend another cent on myself, except now and then for tobacco, a cheap brand.

God bless you, Miss Mary, and make you well soon. Let me know the first moment you are able to see me, but don't exert yourself any for me. God bless you again.

Your faithful devoted friend ever,

CHRISTOPHER LAIRD."

CHAPTER XXX

A STAR IN THE EAST

EACH morning, the very first thing upon completing her toilet, it was now Sophie's custom to go to her mother, give her greetings with lingering sweetness, and inquire as to the night she had passed.

On the day following Chris's arrival, and before the Trenham-Hallonquist ménage was aware of his coming, the young wife emerged from the sick-room her face plainly stamped with alarm.

Half-unconscious of where her steps led her, she returned to her bedchamber, and, passing through and beyond it, re-entered the pleasant dressing-room annex.

Karl had just finished shaving. Catching sight of his wife in the mirror, he wheeled round at once. "And how is Mother today?" he inquired, in a tone which revealed it as part of the morning's routine.

No answer being given, his blond brows contracted; and pursing his mouth for a whistle, as if in dismay, he suddenly changed to the lowered query, "She ain't worse?"

"I can't honestly say that she's worse," Sophie

told him, "but if you'd seen her just now as I did, with one little shaft of grey light on her exquisite face—And it held that—that—happy faraway smile which I know, though I never have seen it before, must lie on the lips of those who die in the Lord."

As she stammered these last tragic words, she flung herself on to a couch, all of her slender and vigorous being one tempest of grief.

Trenham threw himself down to his knees beside her, "Now, my dearest," he pleaded, "you know this won't do——"

"Oh, but Karl," Sophie wailed to him, "I couldn't bear it right now—right now when I'll need her so badly. Every girl needs her mother most—then."

The two lovers rocked silently together, until the wife's long sobs had been stilled.

"That's better, my own precious darling. You be quiet—that's right. You've got me and our secret to think of, as well as your poor little mother. Have you told her yet?"

"No—not ye-ye-yet," quavered Sophie. "I've wanted to, and I've tried; but somehow, at the last, when about to begin it, I got frightened for fear of the shock."

"I don't believe she would think it a shock. In fact, I believe it might help her."

"Perhaps so. I will make myself tell her today. Oh, Karlie, you old *angel*. You are such a wonder-

ful comfort!" she nestled, her soft lips seeking his.

In the calm of the forenoon Sophie told her secret.

She scarcely had needed a word, for to all of the mothers on earth the white light of Annunciation has a glory apart from all lesser revelations.

Through the rest of the morning Mary Hallonquist lay without movement or sound, a herald smile on her silver-white face, and her eyes wide blue heavens of hope, across which, now and again, drifted small clouds of memory.

About twelve o'clock Sophie ventured to knock, and had just entered when a vigorous battering of fists on the door put an end to all talk in an instant.

"Letter done jes' bin lef' by dat young, yaller postman fer Miss Mary Hallonquist, fo' hunderd an' forty one Regint's Road, Dunrobin, Virginny," announced Tempey, as if reading aloud.

"Not really for *me*. Come in, Tempey," the sick woman added. "Why, *nobody* writes to me now. I've been so negligent of all my old correspondents. Oh, I know, it's an advertisement."

"Nome, 'tain't no ad-ver-tise-ment, Miss Mary. Hit's a sure 'nuff, fo' de Lawd letter, wid de stamp an' de backin' an' all. I did think at fust hit was writ by de quality," the bearer commented, scowling down at the missive once more. "De han'writ-in' is what hit should be, but den when I turnt hit

over I seed dat de thumb wan't clean what run over de flap after lickin' hit——"

"That sounds not unlike Uncle Chris," Sophie laughed, noting a flush stealing over Mary's cheek. "Going to read it aloud to the family, Mother," she teased, then running to Tempey, and slipping her arm through a gingham one, cried, "Come on, Mammy. No place for us now."

"Yes, it *is* Chris's writing. It really is Chris," Mary whispered, her eyes on the letter.

She reversed it, scrutinizing the postmark. It was unmistakably "Dunrobin," at which Mary fell back to her pillow with a little moan. "Then he's home," she reasoned. "Or rather, *they're* home, and this is their announcement of the marriage."

She flung the white letter to one side as though it had scorched her. "I *can't* open it," she wept, in helpless bondage to her misery. "I know I'm silly and weak, but somehow I just *can't*."

After an indulgence in tears, the usual reaction of which brought her partial composure, she finally tore the envelope apart and read.

It was but a few moments later that Sophie and Tempey, hearing a sharp, sudden scream, forced themselves to a simultaneous dash toward the sick-room.

Sophie reached the door first, and, finding it locked, almost sank to its threshold with terror. "Wait right where you are, Mammy Tempey," she chattered, "I'll go round by the steps that lead

through our new bathroom, and try to get in that way."

To her mighty relief she succeeded, and only stopping to unfasten the door for Tempey, ran up to her mother.

For a few dreadful heart-beats Sophie thought the still figure was lifeless. It was lying back across the pillows, and the hands—through the fingers of which showed the dog's-ears and points of a just crumpled letter—were crushed to her breast.

Doctor Stepp arrived promptly. The usual restoratives were given, and shortly the blue eyes opened wide to a world which, indeed, had been suddenly remoulded much nearer to her sore heart's desire.

Chris called late on the same afternoon, having been told by "niece Letty" of Mrs. Hallonquist's sudden and quite unaccountable turn for the better.

Naturally, to the writer of Chris's impassioned love-letter the reason of the change was clear. So Alonzo was fatally right! All Miss Mary had needed was just what his letter had told her.

A happy and rosy-cheeked Sophie threw the door wide at his ring. "Uncle Kiss! How delightful! I hadn't heard that you were back. Why, Mother only got your letter yesterday, and I felt sure it was from some place up North."

"No," said Lochinvar heavily, "I wrote it right here in this town. How's Miss Mary?"

"Oh, haven't you heard?" Sophie sparkled. "We've been frightfully anxious, but now Mother's going to get well."

"I've heard as much," Chris replied in the voice of a mourner. "Look here, Sophie," he added, his tone sinking low, and one furtive glance cast back over a shoulder, to see whether Thigpen pursued. "Is it plumb downright true? Is Miss Mary as well as you looks for?"

"Every bit as well," Sophie carolled. "You never saw anything like it? She's improving each moment she breathes. Oh, oh, Uncle Kiss—I'm so happy!"

"Me—me—too!" stammered Chris, with a fatuous, downward extension of trembling lips. "I'm just bu'sting with joy. But——" and here he offered as his lover's tribute a long box from the florist's.

"How sweet of you! Wait right here, while I carry your flowers to Mother," Sophie encouraged. "I'll soon bring you a message from her."

She flew in at the door, but Chris clutched her. "Never mind," he gasped out. "It don't matter. I won't wait. I don't want Miss Mary harried."

"Oh, she won't think it harrying," the daughter laughed.

As the door slammed, Chris hesitated for a while, then rushed for the steps, and had begun a quick trot toward the gate, when Sophie's voice caught him.

"Uncle Kiss—come on back—I've your message."

"You got me a message, you say?" he inquired very feebly. "Air you sure she meant it for *me*, and no other?"

"What a question! Why, of course it's for you. Mother said to tell Chris— What's the matter?"

"No-no-thing," he stuttered. "I only tripped over one foot. This here boot, it's too big for my tootsie—I'm a-hearing you now—keep right on."

Sophie's eyes narrowed a trifle. "Do you want it in her very own words?"

"I—I—reckon I do. Yes—fire straight, I ain't crawling."

"Well, Mother says the very first thing she will do in the morning when the doctor lets her sit up for an hour will be to answer your astonishing, dear and ridiculous letter."

The hearer stood still, for what seemed to them both a long silence.

"You're dead sure she spoke them words what named my poor letter—ree-dic-u-lous?" Chris finally asked.

"Yes, just that. Oh, I shouldn't have told you! I'm sure she couldn't have meant it. But you know Mother's weak yet, Uncle Chris," Sophie exclaimed in contrition.

"Weak!" he cried with the note of a trumpet. "What's the matter with us, little girl, is that *she's* got all the sense!"

After this, to Sophie's utter amazement, the radiant man jerked off his hat, tossed his shuck-coloured hair to the breezes, and laughed as if he were going stark mad.

"You—you—must try not to notice," he got out on a short, sobbing breath. "When a great misery hits you plumb in the middle—— Hold on there just a minute——"

The young matron paused, still puzzled, but rather more scornful.

"Pur—pur—please, don't tell your maw that I laughed," he besought, on a new suspiration.

"It is nothing I care to recall, for I tell you right now, Uncle Chris," and she eyed him distastefully, "you are either drunk or crazy."

With these words she sped up the walk and left him.

Chris lived in a sort of dream until the letter was put in his hand, and then, like a dog with a bone he crept to his kennel to read it.

"You dear Chris—let me tell you at once that my answer is *No*—the tenderest, lovingest 'no' that ever was spoken; but one that can *never* be changed.

It was kind and just like *you* to be so deeply worried because of my illness, and want 'to take care of me ever.' But I don't need it now, because of a *wonderful* something that has only just come into my life. There are *two* wonderful somethings, to be truthful, yet I can only tell of one in this letter.

My daughter—Sophie—is going to need me more

than she has ever done. You will know what I mean—you who loved the white fox on the hillside, and cared for the dumb mother-sheep. You see, I remember *all* the things that you tell me. And when this sweet winter is past, and Sophie has looked into the face of her firstborn—I want you to teach me about the critters you love—the processional pines, and the fighting spiders too, though I count on my teacher to keep them from stinging his pupil. And Chris, most of *all*, I want to know about the *Lycosa*! If you only *knew* what Miss Lizzy Lycosa was meaning to *me* at this moment! But I don't think you *ever* will know.

In just about a week I think I'll be able to see you, and won't we both laugh at this idea of yours, that you ought to propose to and protect me? No, my dear—you must always remain what you are to me now at this writing—the *best*, the *dearest*, *most* loyal of friends—may God make me worthy of all you have given, dear Chris, and will I know continue to give to your humbled, yet happy old friend,

Your

'MISS MARY.'

Chris read it through twice without a pause. Then he raised his bent head. "Lord!" he groaned, dragging out from its niche a dingy pocket handkerchief. "The sense she is got—the *good* sense! of course there never was a thought—except in the cracked skull of 'Lonzo—of Miss Mary and me mincing round getting married. We is both better off as we air—and may God bless her!"

CHAPTER XXXI

BLESSING

SO Chris's Miss Mary got well, and, along with the fresh meed of vigour regained almost her virginal beauty, and a new tranquil poise of soul.

And why should she not—this devoted and sorely-tried being? In one golden day she had realized Chris as all her own, and had strained to a long-famished heart the clinging, enraptured form of a newly found daughter.

Then, later the following summer, the firstborn of the Trenhams opened heaven-blue eyes to the world.

At first, neither parent attempted to hide a keen disappointment that the little one was not a boy. But, to the grandmother, to Mary, the fact of its sex was just one more deep cause for rejoicing.

“My blessing—my blessing,” she whispered, her fond, humid eyes on the delicate face. “The others may call you Mary Baring, and I'm glad it is so, but for me your name will always be ‘Blessing.’”

In all matters of business, things were “coming Karl's way” with a vengeance. The shot tower's

trade boomed loudly, and was growing to such an extent that fresh runnels of interest were leading "up North" and "out West." It was now that the young man began to make trips to that Mecca of all financiers, New York City.

In the face of Karl's steady progress, he and Sophie began to feel that the cottage, while all very well for a young couple's start, was a rather poor housing for what they had worked up to now.

"Yes, the time has come to build," the two agreed, and one evening soon after, the husband and wife set themselves to reckon up their assets, the exact amount of cash and credit that might be employed.

"Of course," Sophie observed, tapping with the unsharpened end of her pencil a square white tooth, "so much will depend, Daddy, upon the size and location of the lot we get."

Karl gave a start. "I don't believe you've quite taken in the fact that if things are worked right—if we just push together—we could manage to put up a house that would place us at once in the class where *you* at least belong, and me partly—that is, of historic Virginians who still live on the land granted to their forbears by kings. Do you get me?"

Sophie's face lit up with the dawn of excitement. "Not exactly, though it sounds rather frightfully thrilling."

"There are ways—without using much cash—

and while luck's running with me, is the time to take risks. It's your right, my dear girl, to be given a fine setting that suits you, and another thing, too, we must think of—Mary Baring may not always be the one child. Oh, Sophie—you *darling!*” he broke in to reach for her hand, “to blush for your husband like that. No wonder I stay crazy-mad over you, and get worse every day that I live! But of course, precious love, you must see for yourself that we've got to have sons to inherit the fruits of our efforts.”

“I see it,” she murmured with adorable meekness. “You mean, we should rebuild big Hallonquist Hall?”

“Exactly,” he caught with a laugh from her red lips, “and we won't wait until we are too old to enjoy it! No, my sweetheart, that's not Karl Trenham's way, not by a little! We'll get the goods now, while we're young—a huge, showy palace.”

“All right,” smiled his wife, “and I want to hear about the finances—how you think you can possibly make it.”

Karl's eyes fell away, but his voice remained clear and convincing.

“First of all—through my credit and that of the shot tower business, and then next by—a mortgage.”

Sophie sat up very straight. “A mortgage! On what?”

"This whole property," he replied, with a broad, sweeping gesture. "The Hallonquist lot which is yours, and this cottage."

"Mother'll never consent."

"Yes, she will," Karl encouraged, "all she needs is to be jollied along the right way. If it wasn't so late," he remarked, with a glance at the clock which was just going ten, "I'd go rouse her right now and begin it."

"I won't let you, Karlie. Little Mary's been droopy all day, and you know what that does to Mother. No, it is nothing serious," Sophie added, "only Mother is daffy over the baby."

The next day little Mary was still in a rather high fever.

Doctor Stepp dropped in often, not so much that the small invalid required his frequent visits, but to assuage the anxiety of a woman he liked and admired. Mary's devotion to Blessing—as the child was now generally called—was one of the smiles of Dunrobin.

That evening the weary and still anxious Mrs. Hallonquist dragged herself in for supper. Her face held the pallor and sharply cut lines that betokened a famine of sleep.

Karl looked past the delicate profile to meet the dark eyes of his wife, and, seeing a latent suggestion of warning, immediately withdrew his own.

"Look here, Mother," he began boldly.

Mary turned a slow, answering gaze. "Yes, Karl, I am listening."

"There's something important that Sophie and I want to ask you—a business affair, so to speak——"

"Oh, Karl, *couldn't* whatever it is wait till morning?" the poor lady sighed. "I'm exhausted; and besides, I *must* get back to Blessing," she murmured.

"I'll run to her," interjected Sophie. "And will promise to stay if she isn't asleep. Karl is really anxious to get your opinion."

The husband and wife nodded sagely, the one to the other. Already they worked like the proverbial thumb and forefinger, on a hand shrewdly extended toward whatever door might possibly open to disclose approaching perferment.

The mother submitted, and let herself sink to her favourite small rocking-chair. Both eyes were smarting, and the white lids dropped heavily.

Karl began a rapid explanation of his plans. Sophie, stealing in a few moments later, saw her mother's brown head drooping with exhaustion.

The papers had all been prepared, and were lying flat on the table as if pleading for signature, when the three heard the front door-knob turn.

This time the man's frown was a scowl which brought his thick blond brows together, then his face cleared. "It's old Doc!" he exclaimed, hear-

ing footsteps continue on their way down the hall to the bedrooms. "He won't butt in here."

"It sounded to me like two pairs of feet," Sophie remarked, but no one else appeared to notice the fact.

"Now, Mother, brace up," Karl adjured. "This document means that you are merely lending your lands to your own loving children. The interest will soon be paid back—and we will all be living like kings and queens in a palace—think what a fine thing it will be for Blessing, think of all——"

"I *have* been trying to think," Mary's plaintive tones answered. "But you talk so very loud and fast, Karl, that I can't. The one word that stays in my mind is that dreadful one—*mortgage*."

"Who says 'mortgage'?" a gruff laughing voice at the door now demanded.

"Oh, Chris!" Mary breathed on a cadence of deepest relief. "*Do* come and help me. These two children want me to sign a long paper, and I'm so *dreadfully* tired with nursing I don't understand the first sentence. And besides," she said, rising, "I've got to go in and see what the doctor thinks now of my Blessing!"

"You just toddle right on," the big man encouraged. "I've the whole night to linger in case as you need me."

She sped toward the hall, Chris's fond look attending. A moment later he moved one hand down in the direction of the paper, but Trenham was

before him. "It's a mortgage all right, Mr. Laird. It's something that Sophie and I were anxious to put over, and I know it would have worked out safely. But I know, too, that the crimp was put in when you came. You belong to the old generation whose one motto is 'caution.' This thing's no good now, and had better be burned."

In dead silence he walked to the grate, and thrust the long, crackling sheets down to the heart of the fire, then, with shoulders squared in defiance, he went from the room.

His wife made as if to follow. "A minute there, Sophie, my girl," came Uncle Chris's check-rein. "There's a-something I'm minded to tell you."

"And why should I listen?" she answered, her stormy eyes full on his face. "You've defeated our plans by your coming. You have won. What else is there to say?"

"There is this much," the low voice persisted. "That paper was hurtful to Miss Mary's interests. Of that I'm plumb sure."

"I will not believe it," flashed Mrs. Trenham. "Karl saw to the wording of it himself, and it was as much to Mother's advantage as to mine."

"He told you that," Chris said gently. "Well, your Karl is a powerful hustler. He's bound to get rich in this world—what's the thing both of you yearns for—but sometimes he makes the mistake of going so fast that he runs into himself from behind and goes sprawling. That there mortgage,"

the speaker went on, noting a relaxing of Sophie's stiff shoulders, "played for terribly high stakes. You see, them devil devices are part of your Uncle Chris's business. In fact—though I don't want it ever mentioned—I plumb keep myself paupered a-helping poor farmers and blacks to hold on to theirs.

"Oh, I ain't forgot that your man is more knowing," Christopher cried, at an impatient twitch of silk skirts. "Yet even with him, if just one little cog should slip loose in his injine of finance—the whole crowd, you, Miss Mary an' Blessing—all of you would be nachally ruined."

Sophie's flaunting had ceased. The man knew that his words had made an impression.

"The most I've been thinking," he now recommenced, "is that risks such as this they won't do for an elderly lady. You young ones can crawl out of gulleys and pitfalls, where Miss Mary would slip on the sides. No, my girl, I'm purposed to look out for Miss Mary and Blessing——"

"My own child!" Sophie cried with a short angry laugh.

"Yes, she is yours, in a manner, but the whole town says it, she's far more enlivened to Miss Mary."

Sophie gave a resigned, humorous gesture.

"And being so purposed," Chris continued, quite unruffled, "I have done what I think best for them, and I'm likely to keep on doing so till I'm toted

up on the slope of Old Painter's Bald in my coffin, as I've made all pervisions by will."

Mary's daughter looked down upon him, her glowing face gentled. Then from him she glanced to the fire, where the last blackened fragments were writhing, white ghosts of a screed.

"I know you mean well, Uncle Chris, and it may be you are exactly right, but——" she gave him the smile of the old impetuous Sophie, and stretched both hands to the grate—"for me, there again has dear Hallonquist Hall been burned to ashes."

CHAPTER XXXII

THE NEW YORKERS

FOR a few days Karl sulked; but his mood did not hold very long in the face of his wife's merry banter.

"What's the 'dif' Karlie dear?" she would ask, her brown eyes shining lakes of concession. "After all, we have time and to spare for our final great stunt, as you call it—the rebuilding of Hallonquist Hall.

"For one thing," she continued, "it will save you from carrying that dreadful load of interest. For another, I'm going to beg a great treat for myself, for your wife. It's a thing my heart's set upon. Will you do it, my precious, for me?"

"For *you*, darling!" he stammered. This love of his beautiful wife came upon him at times in a tempest. "Anything that I own—anything! You may have my life blood if you want it."

"Well, I do," Sophie tenderly laughed. "But not spilled and all messy. I want it in the very place it is now—pounding hard in your blessed old veins. The thing I'm going to ask is that, on your very next trip to New York, you will take me."

"You just bet your sweet life!" cried the man,

and from that moment onward they were planning like two happy children.

During the intervening months, they found abundant excitement in having the carpenters "tack on" an entirely unsuitable porte-cochère near the dining-room windows, greatly darkening that brave little apartment. Next a spindling tower sprung up, crowned with bright red shingles, and, to complete the changes, a parlour bay-window was thrust out from the house with such violent newness that it gave the effect of a volcanic upheaval within.

During the absence of the Trenhams in New York, the cottage, though sadly defaced, once again became a real home for Mrs. Hallonquist, and for Chris the friendliest spot on the whole friendly earth.

By this time Mary Baring the second had reached that endearing point in her infant career when not only could she run like a glimmer of light on a stream, but the small tongue was never at rest. Each new word or phrase was repeated, the tender lips stripping the *r's* off like thorns, as a poet once said of her baby.

The young travellers came back from New York a bit unexpectedly. They had outstayed their original date by a fortnight.

Sophie stepped from Dunrobin's one taxi with a genuine Avenue air, and ran up the long lilac walk to where her mother was weeding a violet bed near

the house. The toiler straightened up at the sound of quick footsteps.

"Sophie—you!" she cried out, and her trowel went to the gravel. "You gave me no hint to expect you!"

"But, my *dear!*" she went on in amazed admiration, the tribute forced from her at sight of her daughter's surpassing beauty. "How pretty you look—how—how—queenly, in that splendid coat and those wonderful furs! They bring out all of your colouring. How proud of you Karl must have been!"

"Yes, he was," Sophie dimpled. "But such a jealous old goose, bless his heart. He nearly went wild if another man looked toward the end of the room where I was sitting. All the same, he's a darling! Aren't you glad, Mother dear, that you finally gave your consent?"

Before Mary could answer this somewhat embarrassing question, her companion spared her the trouble.

"It's all wrong," Sophie exclaimed, the bright eyes lashing over the tawdry, amorphous façade of the house. "The whole business is wrong," she decreed in a tone of chagrin. "That tower and awful cupola on top—they are vicious—and that knock-kneed porte-cochère is a disgrace! Why, oh why, didn't Karl take me North before we put up those horrors? It would have saved us such humiliating blunders!"

Karl had followed his wife, both hands strained to hold much handsome new luggage with conspicuous initialing in silver on the sides of each piece. He, too, stared at the wretched building. "Gee, it's fierce!" he remarked, and moved forward.

From the time of this first Northern visit, Mrs. Hallonquist dated a series of notable changes in her daughter.

Sophie acquired, as it were, a new poise, and having attained it, began a deliberate hardening to which soon a high polish was added.

Meanwhile, in the town, Mr. Trenham was known to have made irritatingly frequent allusions to "good old Wall Street, the place where Big Things were put over." Upon the mind of Karl, as upon myriads more of the men of his country, the adjective "Big" was beginning to glow like the signs above Broadway at night.

One subject in common, upon which husband and wife loved to dwell, was the ever increasing intimacy between themselves and their foreign friend, the Count Echstrom.

"Such manner! Such charm. Such *intense savoir-faire!*" Sophie cried, with her gaze on the ceiling.

"I've been told," Karl solemnly proffered, "that the court of Sweden couldn't get on without him."

Chris, ensconced in his big chair paying an evening call, indulged in a wink toward Miss Mary.

"Then, that being the case," he drawled out, "how's it happen they let the cock go, to come strutting about amongst our barnyards?"

"He won't stop long," both young voices assured him.

"The Count is here," explained Sophie, with hauteur, "because dear King Gustave has sent him to buy up some metals and things for his government. Karlie first met him in the office of a big copper broker, and a mutual friend told us that not only is Count Echstrom one of the high aristocrats, but is distantly connected with the royal family of his country."

"And with that of Germany, too," threw in Trenham. "You remember, my dear," he continued with a fond look toward his wife, "how at dinner that last night at the Waldorf he let slip, without seeming to know it, the fact of his kinship—*blood* kinship, Mother—to the Kaiser himself, the great German Emperor."

He paused, for response or exclamation upon the part of his audience, but as nothing was heard, Sophie took up the wondrous tale.

"The Count is so modest," she purred. "When I taxed him with his exalted rank in Sweden, he tried to deny it. But afterward, when he and I were alone sitting on one of those splendid Oriental ottomans——"

"Yes, I knows the things well—I've been there," interjected Chris with unwelcome assurance. "I've

roosted on them benches myself. They lines the two sides of that passage they calls Peacock Alley—though in fact it's more for the pea-hens. I've set on the darn things in turn, just to try them, and I'd just as lieve sit on a cow."

Sophie tossed her dark head, and abandoning the struggle to impress her audience rose to say good-night. At the door, with her hand on the lintel, she paused to fling back across her shoulder, "You may soon have a chance to see Count Echstrom, Mother, for he has promised to visit us here in Dunrobin."

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE BUILDERS

THE number of Karl's trips both to the West and the North increased. On few of the latter did he go without taking his eager and lovely young wife.

Apart from the external splendours of that great American city, New York, which the humblest is free to enjoy, the Trenhams were now in the way of making acquaintances. And these new friends were all of them in a class so gay, wealthy and hospitable, that the still unsophisticated Southerners might well be pardoned for accepting them at their own merry valuation.

Invitations for various week-end visits, began to tingle over the telephone in a certain private suite of a smart hotel. After several glorious experiences down on Long Island, out to Tuxedo, and up Greenwich way, the Virginia couple became convinced that the one thing needful for Dunrobin—now affectionately referred to as their dear little old-fashioned home-town— was the possession at the earliest possible moment of a showy modern Country Club.

The younger Whitlocks at once agreed to back the worthy enterprise, and subscriptions to the full amount were rapidly raised. Almost automatically, Karl became chairman of the building committee, and Sophie the lady in sole charge of entertainments.

Naturally—at least to the Trenhams—the local architect was brushed aside as non-existent, and a “crackajack from the Avenue” (Karl’s own words) was imported through the kind offices of their now ardent friend, Count Echstrom, and it was agreed between Sophie and Karl that the New Yorker should at the same time draw plans for the immediate rebuilding of Hallonquist Hall.

Mary turned her face away when the wild-rose vines and the honeysuckles were stripped off from the piles of peacefully mouldering brick to make way for the erection of a French Château. To her, it was all of it a nightmare. She resented the placing of a foreign imitation where the Hallonquist homestead had lifted walls of such simple dignity. Yet how was she to prevent the desecration?

On the forenoon of a certain April day, to be exact, the fifth of the month, 1916, Letitia Gaither, a woman no longer young, but none the less pleasant to look at, even attractive, because the years of her life had spread a tranquil texture over her fine, strong face, ran down her long hall steps to the lower floor, a small hat thrust on any-

how, and, as she ran, pulling at her second worn glove.

She had scarcely reached the level of the entrance, when, from the service quarter of the house, Aunt Ossie emerged tugging, in ludicrous similitude, at her second glove, and throwing back further orders to the kitchen, through a half-opened door.

"Why, Auntie!" Letty cried, stopped short at the unusual vision. "I didn't know that you were going out. I didn't know that you ever left the house so early in the day."

"I don't. Not often," Ossie admitted. There was a deep, suppressed excitement in her face. "But this is something special. I am going, Niece Letty, to the first real business meeting of my life."

"You mean to the Gaither shot tower?"

"How did you know?"

"I happened to overhear Father at the breakfast table saying to Uncle Chris that the big annual meeting was to be held: and there was something else—about Karl Trenham—that I did not catch."

A grim reflection of a smile flickered on Ossie's lips. "And unless I'm much mistaken," she said with a sort of inner chuckle, "young Trenham is going to find that there is something at this meeting that's out of *his* power to catch. And where are you off to, Letty?"

"Why, Sophie insists that I come out to her house at once, and I know it's to pin me down to going to

that Country Club opening tomorrow afternoon. But that I won't do," Letty concluded with decision.

"Why go there at all, then—to the Trenham's house, I mean?" Ossie inquired, a trifle icily.

"Oh, I can spare half an hour, I suppose. And Sophie is hard to refuse."

Mrs. Trenham was in her bedroom. The ample apartment was a perfume of flowers.

"Gracious, it's not your birthday!" Letty cried in amaze, as her eyes went from a huge glass vase of abnormally stemmed "American Beauties" to a veritable bed of moss-set lilies-of-the-valley; and onto the gold, crystal and silver strewn dresser, where a dome of violets bloomed that might have put to shame the largest of Dutch cabbages.

"No," Sophie laughed, diving into a box where gleaming folds of satin showed through tissue wrappings, "all this hilarity simply means that the Country Club is to have its big housewarming tomorrow evening, but you must sit down—that is—if you can find a place, for I'm going to scold you."

The smiling Letitia finally cleared a seat among the tumbled silks and laces on the bed, and turning to her mentor demanded, "Well!"

"It isn't well, and you know it. It's very, very ill. You are my best friend, and here I've been told that you refuse to be present at my most dazzling triumph, the Club reception."

Letty's smile lost its brightness. "I was afraid

that was what you wanted, Sophie. I'd love to run up here and see you all dressed before you start—are you to wear this white and silver?"

"Yes, with some touches of pale green georgette, also embroidered. But we're not talking dress. I want you at our party. Echstrom arrives tonight, and——"

Letitia cut in. "That's one reason why I'm not going. I can't be in the room with that dreadful man, and not feel I'm shut up with a snake. No, Sophie dearest, I know how delightful your party will be, but my heart, my mind and soul, are steeped in such different things. I've a great piece of news—but I hardly know whether you'll care to hear it."

"Of course I'll care," countered Sophie. "You are my best friend on earth."

Letty hesitated. The look on her pale uplifted face was so unusual, it hinted so strongly of an inner, newborn beauty, that her hostess went toward the seated figure, and stood still. The visitor remained motionless as if expecting her, then all at once reached up and, lifting needle-pricked ringless hands, took both of the other's jewelled ones in an affectionate grasp. "Today I have gained my heart's desire, Sophie. In two more weeks I am to start for France."

"Pshaw!" Sophie exclaimed, flinging away, exactly as she used to do in the old schooldays. "I thought it was something pleasant."

"No," Letty breathed, her grey eyes looking far. "It isn't precisely—pleasant—but it is right from—God."

Mrs. Trenham felt a sob rise in her throat, and needed to bite the full and crimson lips. She opened them now for speaking, but, at the instant, Blessing danced lightly into the room, followed by the adored and never distant 'G'an'muddie.'

"Aunt Letty!" the child cried out, running straight into the arms of the visitor. Finally released from the embrace, Blessing moved around a few paces, then all at once the bank of valley-lilies caught her glance. She ran to it, burying her small face in its waxen chimes.

"Oh, oh," they heard her whisper, "where did you come from, angel-flowers? How did you climb up the stairs? If I was only little—not a gweat big dirl, I'd cwawl wite in 'mongst you and wait till the fwawies came."

All three pairs of adult eyes were turned toward the unconscious Blessing when, suddenly, with a rough nervous jerk, the bedroom door flew open and Karl, crimson and half distraught, as it would seem, ran toward his wife, then seeing the others, came to a shivering stop.

CHAPTER XXXIV

A CHAPTER IN NERVES

THE room cleared as swiftly and as silently as a dissolving scene upon a "movie" film.

Karl, dazed and staring, appeared to be unconscious of environment except in the moment when little Blessing would have tiptoed past him. He gazed hard at the child—pushed back the fair hair from his forehead in the gesture that is a wordless prayer for clearer vision—seemed all at once to recognize her, then caught her up into his arms, kissing the small, fragrant cheek voraciously.

Sophie went to the door with Letitia, and as the latter whispered her final muted farewell, closed the white panel softly. Blessing now demanded exit, and when she too had gone, Sophie deliberately turned the ornate key.

Her husband gave a low hoarse cry that, somehow, conveyed his approbation of her deed, and then, suddenly wavering on his feet, plunged face down into the spread-out finery on the bed. Sophie did not attempt to check him. She leaned above the convulsed form, her whole attitude eloquent with tenderness.

"What is it, Daddy dear?" she questioned.
"What has gone wrong, my dearest?"

"That mountain-cat, that she-devil!" Karl got out. "She's been on my track ever since I jilted Mildred. I believe she's got me now."

"Whom can you mean? Not dried-up old Miss Ossie?"

"Venom don't dry, at least not the kind she holds."

"But what—— How on earth can such a person harm *you*? You, darling, who almost have this little town in the hollow of your hand? Surely you are mistaken."

"Do I look mistaken?" Karl snarled savagely, as he sprung up to a sitting position, and positively glared toward his wife.

She needed to put forth all her powers of self-control. This dull, distorted face with its reddened eyelids, was not that of her gay and carefree Karl.

"Come over here, my precious, worried boy," she coaxed him. "Over to my *chaise longue* by the window, where the sweet air is blowing in. It smells of violets already, wild little sisters to those splendid ones you sent." With these words she nodded toward her dresser.

In speaking she pulled, half-playfully yet with a certain strength, at the limp right arm which dangled from the bed.

The man obeyed her clumsily.

Daring no more than a single rueful glance at

the priceless satin he had wallowed in, Sophie, still smiling and cooing tender words, got him across the room.

Once clasped in the soft resilience of the brocaded chair, the man's strained nerves began gradually to relax.

"She's done it," Karl repeated angrily. "She and that tarheel'd brother with his bugs——"

Evidently this one thought, this new and terrible resentment, filled the entire concave of his firmament.

After the briefest self-communion, Sophie decided it was best to win the whole story gradually.

She seated herself close to him, smoothing the moist, hot forehead. "Now tell me all the trouble, dear. Maybe I'll find a way to help. When did you find it out?"

"Only just now," he answered. "When I got there, to our annual stockholders' meeting, I saw to my horror that at Cousin James's left elbow was sitting that grinning old maid, ready to find me out."

He paused for a renewed paroxysm of fury and strong language, at which the other asked him gently, "How did it happen that a woman—and of all, Miss Ossie—had any business there?"

"That's the whole point! During my trips up North, it seems that she and her brother, followed by all the old female dead-losses of the town, rushed

Cousin James, demanding stock in the tower works."

"But, Karl," Sophie cried, amazed, "I'm sure I heard you say that more stock had been put on the market, and you were anxious to have it sold."

"That's all right too," he conceded. "We needed to increase our capital, but any man with one grain of business sense, would have looked out for who he sold the shares to."

His listener was puzzled, but knowing with whom she had to deal, thought it best to remain silent, retaining a childlike gaze.

"Of course the old demon had it up her sleeve," Trenham now burst forth, proving his wife's judgment correct. "Would you believe it, Sophie, that aged hell-cat has studied up company laws, until, by God, she could stand a grilling in the Supreme Court of this country! What she's been up to all along has been to change the tower works from an unlimited concern into an I. N. C. corporation!"

"But why? What for? Even a student like Miss Ossie wouldn't do such a thing just for fun."

"For fun! Great God, *no*, as you soon will see!" the other groaned. "Her purpose has been clear enough. It's all to ruin *me*. I'm no longer the autocratic boss of the concern, but a mere servant whose every move must be passed upon by a board of suspicious enemies."

Sophie shook her head. "I fear," she challenged sweetly, "that somebody will have to explain."

Trenham regarded her indulgently, and, with an arm flung out, drew her against his shoulder.

"Well, it's like this, my pet. All of the big deals that Echstrom and I have been putting over for a year past have pivoted, more or less, on the credit of the company. In times like these—when every sort of barn is being turned into a munition factory—our shot tower is a veritable diamond mine."

"I see," she nestled. "And I have gathered a nice bunch of the diamonds. Go on."

"So long as the company was unlimited, with me as director, sole manager and boss-at-large, Echstrom and I found a convenient way of helping ourselves by using its credit freely."

"But how has poor Miss Ossie's coming in altered things?"

"You don't see yet? Bet you I do," the man said, rising again and holding her away. "She put in all those shares, of widows and orphans, and withered virgins like herself, and came to this important meeting with the sole determination to kick me out of the saddle."

"I know I'm awfully stupid. Kiss me, dear."

He could not resist the red lips held so near, and their pressure steadied him. "Of course you don't understand, my precious, and there's no reason you should. But what it means to me, and the ruin it

threatens, is that I no longer have the power to put up the whole tower works as a stake."

To this his wife said nothing, only kissed him again.

"Echstrom is due tonight," Karl muttered as if to himself. "If I were sure he wouldn't tear up the road about it——"

"Now don't you worry about what Echstrom thinks," Sophie cried gaily. "I can twist him around my little finger any day. I tell you what we'll do—after luncheon we'll drive once more to the Club to see that the last thing is in order for the party—then we will keep on driving, come home to the kind of dinner you like best, and go to bed early so you can rest up for tomorrow's stress."

"Me, go to bed with that German wolf coming!" Trenham exclaimed harshly. "No, I've my orders to meet him at the train."

After a meal which he barely tasted, filling all needs with cocktails and black coffee, Karl sent for Fischer—the perfect new chauffeur obtained from New York through the kind aid of Count Echstrom—and drove to his office, sending the car back for his wife's use.

Alone she went to the Club, for Blessing was still at the Red Cross rooms with her loved Aunt Letty, and Mary refused to go with her daughter.

The very effective decorations were in place, and tomorrow, for the great reception young girls would be at hand. Sophie had planned their costumes to

the last fluttering ribbon, and intended to use them as one might flowers in the general decorative scheme.

Her own house was unusually deserted when Mrs. Trenham returned home, and longing for human speech she sought out Tempey.

Just as she set her slender slippered feet on the linoleum of the kitchen floor, the pendent clock that hung over the stout table where Tempey's famous beaten biscuit were pounded out struck a sharp nasal "five."

The mistress started. Somehow, the stroke which should have been familiar, sounded queer. "Look here, Mrs. K. G. Trenham," she said to herself, "you too can't indulge in nerves. Karl has the market cornered."

Tempey, seated by the table, with a pan of early peas, glanced up and smiled to see her nursling.

"Mammy, Mammy, I'm worried," said Sophie, as she drew up a straight-backed chair, and set her elbows on the spotless board.

Mammy emitted a bursting sound not unlike that of a porpoise.

"Gowanaway f'um here wid dat talk of worryin'. Ain't no young lady on dis yearth what's got mo' good things dan you."

"It's true," Sophie agreed, "and I do appreciate the splendid things I have. But where's the fun of it, if my husband is going to break down under the strain of giving them to me?"

Tempey's face sobered. Here was something real.

"Even Karl's fine health can't stand such terrible ill-treatment," his wife went on lugubriously. "Coffee, cigarettes, cocktails and highballs all day long with precious little food—and after that more coffee. Oh, I have seen him stealing in here to you, and you oughtn't to let him have it so strong, Mammy. It's up to you and me to have it stopped."

Mammy's embarrassment merged for the moment to a deep concern.

"Yas, my baby-lam', I knows it, but how is we two po' weaker vessels to make min-folks behave deyselves? We like to r'ar about an' say 'You mus' do dis,' an' 'You got to do dat,' but all de time we feels de mins [men] is got dey splay-foots right on us 'oomen's neck. De Lawd Hisself is fixed de world up dat way, an' what kin we po' an' perishin' bodies do 'ginst de Lawd?" This time her sigh was of such volume that a green mass of pea-hulls scurried to the floor.

"I knows what you is suffrin', Mammy knows," she soothed, wagging her turbaned head. "I goes th'oo it all wid Grief. Is you an idee I kin make dat nigger take one draw de less fum dat stinkin' pipe o' hissen? No Lawd, I can't not onless I has a poker or a broomstick in my hands—an', mo' dan dis, each time my back is turnt, dar is Grief dreenin' of de coffee-pot. An', dat isn't all."

Her tone was so significant, so pleading to be questioned, that Sophie, smothering a smile, asked

with affected gravity, "What worse could any man do?"

Mammy locked all about, even to peering far beneath the table as though her spouse could be hiding there, then, after one more glance over the ceiling, confessed.

"He's *jee-lous*, old Grief is. He's dat ongodly *jee-lous*, dat I ain't dasn't raise a prayer in my own black church when de Reverind Drake is presidin'."

"I had my own suspicions that Uncle Grief wasn't any too fond of Drake, but isn't the Reverend Pig to be sent off to a far distant puddle—I beg your pardon, to another church?" inquired Sophie.

"Yes." Tempey drooped. "He's goin'. Dat sancterfied young Christian man is druv out by de mins he's preached to. De sisters, dey likes him, but de brederin'—dey says he's a heap wus dan Solermun when hit comes to wives.

"But speakin' o' devils," she broke off, staring intently toward the door where a shuffling sound was heard, "Dar he is now. Whar you bin all dese hours?" she demanded, as Grief's white woolly head peered cautiously within.

Mrs. Trenham had risen, but paused to hear Grief's defence.

"Whar I done bin, you ax me? Howdy, Miss Sophie," he thrust in with a scrape and a bow.

"Proud for to see you thrivin'. Whar I done bin, you sister in de Lawd?" he glared at his wife.

"Dat's what I 'quested," Tempey slowly returned, reaching meanwhile a stealthy hand toward her biscuit roller. "Whar you done bin dis long?"

Before replying, Grief, with nonchalant assurance, drew his three-legged stool near the stove and shamelessly extracted his old pipe.

"Me an' de yodder brederin', we is met in de scrub-pine grove beside de house of Gawd, fer to 'cuss out ways an' means fer a welcome farewell party we's aimin' to give Pig Drake next Monday when he leaves."

Even Sophie could realize that Grief's chuckle accompanying these words was uncanny and derisive.

"We sistern', we'll take keer of de farewell banket," Tempey bluffed. "We is pledged two dozen chickens——"

"All dat we wants is dey fedders," Grief piped up shrilly.

"An' we's gwinter have a bonfiah."

"So's we!" shrieked a demoniac Grief. "Wid a sugar-bilin' pot on de top of hit, all filt wid bubblin' tar——"

Tempey surrendered.

"Now, in de name of Jesus, you devils ain't gwinter tar an' fedder dat sainted man——"

"'Pens on de sisters an' dey own cavortin's when

de partin' time comes," remarked Grief sagely. "But de ingredients will be on de spot."

Sophie withdrew. Tempey arose, but there was no pride in her bearing.

"Grief, honey-lam'," she simpered. "Don't you want yo' ol' lady to bile you a nice big pot of coffee, spankin' fresh?"

CHAPTER XXXV

APRIL THE SIXTH, 1916

AT two o'clock the next morning, in what seemed to Sophie the dead of a black, startled night, she woke, frightened, to hear a man's footsteps blundering about in her unlighted room.

"Karl, Karl?" she asked sharply, "is that you?"

"Yesh, my love," he said thickly, with a half-drunken laugh. "Were you shp-shpec-ting any one else?"

Catching back a low cry of disgust, Sophie sprang from the bed and snapped on the nearest electric light.

Her husband looked foolishly toward her.

"Don't be mad with your hubby, dear girl," he began, pawing his way across to her side. "Had to stay up with Echstrom, you know. Had to jolly him 'long. He's a sport, Echstrom is. Says he don't care a tinker's damn 'bout the old shot tower. We're dealin' with world-wide affairs, Ech. an' me. Our wires are laid, and in 'bout three days more, so Ech. says, if that fool of a college don up at the White House don't get smarty, and spoil

our game, we'll pull off a deal will make Wall Street envious.

"Those were Echstrom's words, and he beat me on the back like a real American. He's a shport, Echstrom is, a sure-'nough, dead-game shport. We were talkin' of you, too, my darling. Ecce said——"

"At least spare me the Count's personal opinion of me," Sophie cried in a voice that stopped all further disclosures.

The Country Club reception was to start promptly at three in the afternoon. At an earlier hour, members of the several committees met for a luncheon party. Karl, at one end of the beautifully appointed table, had Mrs. James Garfield Whitlock on his right, while at the other end Sophie, resplendent in a Paris frock and hat, and wearing a corsage-bouquet of violets and orchids, had as her guest of honour the affable Count Echstrom.

Never had the accomplished foreigner appeared to greater advantage, charming every one, men and women alike, by his sunny friendliness and his astounding knowledge of international affairs.

Gaily protesting that to drink champagne so early in the day was a crime, a solecism, Karl, urged on by Echstrom's whispers, continued ordering the heady wine.

That point of hectic pleasure had been reached where the foolish laughter was loud, and the stories

told were of an increasingly doubtful character, when a grinning waiter at Karl's ear murmured, "Long-distance, Mister Karl. Hit's 'way fum Washington, an' seys dey wants Mister Count Extra."

Echstrom sprang up. "With all excuses possible," he bowed, letting his eyes brush amorously each fair one in turn, lingering last of all upon Sophie.

A few moments later the same waiter tiptoed in. "De Count he axes you to jine him, Mister Karl."

The two men remained away so long that Sophie began to fidget. Through the strained silence, those at the table could hear the starting of an automobile.

"Why, there goes our car down the hill," cried Mrs. Trenham, staring through the nearby window. "But surely," she added, her rosy face paling, "Karl wouldn't go like that without a word to me!"

"No, Karl wouldn't, like that," said an unnatural voice. Turning, she saw him coming slowly across the polished heart-pine floor.

"Well, Wilson's done it!" he proclaimed, sinking down weakly to his former place. "The jig is up. We're in it!"

"Not in the war—tell us quickly, Trenham!" Whitlock cried.

"War was declared at two o'clock today."

"Thank God!" and across the demolished table Whitlock's wife's eyes said as fervently, "Thank God!"

"But where is Echstrom—why did he have to go?" Sophie demanded.

"He had to wire to Washington at once. He wouldn't trust this new booth to get the message straight. Oh, it's awful—simply awful!"

The little company quickly broke up, the luncheon guests escaping with other things to think of. Karl and Sophie, however, in their part of host and hostess, were compelled to remain and see the reception through.

Trenham most obviously avoided a tête-à-tête with his anxious wife. She, tied by fate to the head of the Dunrobin "receiving line" as a martyr to her wheel, needed to bow, to smile and greet each newcomer with a pleasant word while, from the corner of a shrinking eye, she noted her husband piloting every fresh group of men-guests to that secluded spot where lurked the bar.

A little after five o'clock Sophie saw him pawing at a negro waiter, and teetering back and forth upon his heels. Feeling it impossible to endure the strain for another instant, Mrs. Trenham broke from the line and overtook him before he could escape.

"Karl dear—Karl," she whispered, grasping his arm, "you are not well, and I am at the limit. Order the car, for I must get home."

"Order the car, you say," echoed the other, grinning foolishly. "Echstrom has skipped, taking our fine German chauffeur with him. Our car stranded at station. Nobody drive it. Order our car."

He was rapidly falling into that most betraying sign of hiccups. Sophie put one arm around him and led him outside.

It was nearly dark. She could see, through the purple grape-bloom of the valley, small yellow points of light which betokened the city. Hurrying up to the nearest silhouette of a standing automobile, she spoke to its chauffeur.

"I am Mrs. Karl Trenham, and my husband is very ill. I want you to drive us home, as our car has failed to meet us. I'll make it worth your while," she added, seeing the mulatto hesitate. "Whose automobile is this?"

When the negro had told the name, Sophie commanded. "Help Mr. Trenham in,—don't let him get back to the club-rooms—while I run and get permission from your employer."

Throughout that dreadful night Karl Trenham lay in the dull, bestial torpor of drunken oblivion.

His heavy slumber held until high noon next day. At luncheon he was still in a stupor. While Sophie, her mother and Blessing were at the table, a second telegraph message arrived.

"I will keep this one, too," Sophie nodded toward Mrs. Hallonquist. "And hide them both until

Karlie has had his bath, and has eaten some solid food. He's nearly dead, my poor darling."

Scarcely had she spoken, when Karl's voice—a harsh burlesquing of his usual pleasant one—came to their ears. "Sophie—I say—oh, Sophie! Wasn't that wire for me?"

She ran upstairs with the two telegrams, and then strove to dissuade him from opening them.

"Wait till you've had your refreshing bath—dear Daddy. Wait and have luncheon first."

He motioned her words aside as though they had been a swarm of buzzing insects, flung himself to the end of the *chaise longue*, tearing at the envelopes in his hands.

"The scoundrel! The damned skunk! The quitter!" he groaned out, and crumpled the evil tidings into rustling balls of paper.

When Sophie, thoroughly alarmed by his appearance, asked him a question, he sprang up like a creature prodded by a spear, and threw himself about the room, making such wild, unmeaning gesticulations, that his wife's one concern was to palliate and soothe him.

"The one thing, dearest," the tormented man assured her later on, "that might help to keep me from going stark, raving mad would be to take a long drive with you—only the two of us—out to the edge of some world where there isn't any war."

"I'll go with you there, and further," Sophie

comforted him. "You are my world—my life—my *everything*. But, Karlie, we must have some common-sense. The car is still at the station, and neither of us know how to manage that new machine."

"What if we don't!" cried Trenham recklessly. "At least I'm competent to start and stop the thing. Fischer—the damned Bosch spy—unbended to the point of letting me know that much. How 'bout it, dearest, are you game?"

An hour later the huge car spun along delightfully responsive. Sophie beside her husband, beautiful in her costly furs, with his great bunch of violets pinned above her heart, had never been more endearing.

"God, but I'm glad we came!" the man exclaimed impulsively, "and the old hearse is as easy to run as any fivver." For the first time that day he tried to produce a smile.

Sophie's soft, glowing cheek was pressed for an instant to his shoulder. "Things will come all right yet, my Karlie. What can fate do to us, so long as we have each other?"

Unconsciously to both, and yet, as later it would seem by a route inevitable, they were purring along the road to a distant hill, whereon, at the very summit, there lay a squarish corn-patch held back from the thoroughfare by an old zigzag fence.

"How quiet and clean the world seems up here," sighed Trenham, as they reached the first corner

of the opening. In speaking he began to cut off the feed of gasoline to the merest trickle.

"I'll tell you what let's do," he cried out like a boy. "Let's stop the car, get out, and walk away from the sight of it, and try to forget we're old and married and——"

"Successful," interjected Sophie, to which the young man answered by a groan.

Catching one another's hands, they slowly made their way to that very spot, in an angle of the gaunt, horizontal bars, where Karl first held his schoolgirl sweetheart in his arms.

There was something of solemn import in the hushed hour apart, a touch as of a sacrament. Perhaps, in her swift coming, Fate whispered to them a hint that this was their last sweet communion on earth together.

Once seated, side by side, with backs to the old rail fence, Karl slipped down forward by a few inches in order that his bare, blond head might rest on the fur of Sophie's shoulder.

"Sophie—my darling," he smiled a challenge to her bending face. "I know that I love you more than any woman has ever loved a man."

Sophie's lips quivered. "I know it, my precious, my dearest. I feel it all the time, and there are moments—this is one of them—when it frightens me."

"You mean—you mean the risks I run?"

"Yes, dear, the risks. The awful nervous pitch

to which you are keyed this very minute. Life isn't worth the living at such a price."

"No—no it *isn't*," the husband answered. "And if I can just get out of this snare alive, I'm going to cut off the pressure. You just see if I don't. Right now—I'm caught. Sophie, I'm caught, like a rabbit in a nigger's trap. And the sly coon that set it was that smooth German devil Echstrom. You don't guess yet what he's done to us."

"No, Karl, I don't. I'm waiting to hear it now."

Trenham sat erect. The old tingle of excitement came to his eager voice. "You knew, of course, that what we set out to do was to sell at enormous prices, and to send by whole shiploads, metals and munitions to the German Government?"

"I wasn't sure about the munitions," Sophie said slowly.

"Well, they were there all right. We ran huge risks naturally, because we had to lie and fool Washington and sign some queer declarations. But everything was the richest velvet. Our biggest cargo was ready to sail, and if only that damned proclamation of war had been delayed——"

Sophie leaned over and pressed her lips to his quivering mouth.

"Sophie, my precious wife," Karl cried at the end of a long pause, and swinging round to her. "Sophie, what could you stand with me? How much of poverty—maybe—disgrace?"

There was no faltering in the brilliant smile she gave him. "Haven't I told you within the hour that you are the one man I ever loved, or ever will love through all eternity?"

"Suppose," he now whispered, looking furtively about, as if for lurking listeners, "that it comes to mean the—penitentiary?"

He shuddered at the dreadful syllables, but Sophie's head went up.

"What would you do then, Sophie? What would you do?" he gulped.

"This is what I'd do," she answered valiantly. "I'd leave Mother and Blessing in the cottage here, and I'd rent a shanty in sight of your cell window. I think I'd take in washing, and as I scrubbed and dried, and hung things on the line, we'd make up a code of signals and talk whenever the watchers—or whatever the beasts are called—had their backs turned to us. There I would work and wait until my dear lover came to me free again."

"By God! and I know you mean it!" choked the man. "Sophie, my beloved! My darling!"

"Then turn to your wife once more," she coaxed him, in exquisite allurements. "Let me see both those eyes that I love so well, heaped and running over with bright, blue laughter—that's right! Now you can kiss me once more—only once—for we must start for home."

Laughing and wrangling like two happy children, they reached the automobile.

"Now, Karlie, you must be careful!" Sophie chided him with a hint of apprehension in her lovely voice. "Remember this car is unfamiliar."

"Pah! it's a flivver, a regular old cow," Trenham defied her. "Watch me skim down this curve."

The next thing Sophie knew was the crash and dreadful clatter of shattered glass. Her head jerked forward, struck at one temple the steering-wheel.

When she recovered consciousness, and had dragged herself from the wreck of what had once been a limousine, she saw Karl lying face down and motionless, clear out in the road.

She staggered toward him, caught the body in her arms, and again went out from all knowledge of a living world.

CHAPTER XXXVI

HOW TRENHAM PAID HIS DEBTS

SOPHIE! My little girl. Poor stricken lambkin what you are, poor Sophie! Couldn't you make out for to cry a mite, here on your Uncle Chris?"

As the body he held kept its rigid unresponsiveness, the compassionate voice went on.

"Tears holds a power of healing when you shed them right. I know, for I've had to shed them. Darling, just strive to cry."

"I don't think that I can," at last she answered, in a thin prim fashion, like a child who recites an uncomprehended verse at school. "Something is wrong with me—a something queer."

"What sort of a queer thing, darling? Can't you tell Uncle Chris?"

She stared up into his face with her first hint of partial recognition, and, beckoning him to follow, tiptoed across the room. There, on a raised, black square, shrouded in cloth and heaped about with flowers, in white content, her dead young husband lay.

"Come close—still closer," she whispered, her

vacant, glittering eyes beating about as if fearing an eavesdropper.

"The matter is just *this*," she explained, lifting one finger and its thumb, and poising them above the helpless face. "If only I dared to pull up one frozen eyelid, and then—if that blue eye laughed—I'm sure I could cry!" she triumphed, and with the final words began a low, ghoulisn chuckle.

At the crafty, peering look that went with the motions of her uplifted hand, the blood in Chris's veins seemed to stand still.

"Sophie, you—you musn't, child. It's awful!" he got out, and forced himself to catch at her wrist.

At the firm touch, reason burned back through her clouded brain. She stared at her upraised fingers, as if in wonder at their predatory poise, then down again at her husband.

"Karl dear," she smiled. "My Karlie."

Chris held his breath.

"Karl dear, it is Sophie. It's your wife. Won't you open your eyes? I can't stand this nightmare much longer. Kiss me. Oh, make me wake up quickly. Karlie, my precious lover, I tell you I can't stand it!"

Through the grim silence of the room, Chris's low prayer sobbed: "Hurry and help her, God Almighty!"

Sophie turned to him with a sullen, resentful flash in her sunken eyes. "I didn't ask God. I

was speaking to my husband. Karl—oh, Karl—Daddy—listen to me, Karl——”

She leaned down and clutched at a shoulder that felt marble to her touch, and, at the awful truth, with a scream that almost rent poor Chris's heart in twain, she fell forward, limp and senseless.

Christopher caught her before she reached the dead body. “Thankee—thankee—thankee,” his lips chattered as, with his tragic burden, he went in search of Mary.

To the intense relief of those who had in charge the last arid offices that man can give his fellow, good Dr. Stepp felt justified in giving the frenzied widow such sedatives that, through the final scenes, Sophie remained apart and unknowing.

About ten days after the “Trenham accident” as, on the lips of casual speech, it had already become, early one Sunday afternoon, the Gaither family, with the two elder Thigpens and their children, filed from the dinner table, into the sunlit “drawing-room,” as Miss Laird insisted that it should be called.

When seated, all eyes were turned to James Gaither, who, instantly self-conscious, cleared a dry throat and launched a withered smile.

Letty, perched on his chair-arm, patted his thinning hair.

“Make it brief, Daniel Webster,” she teased, “for I’ve a date to keep.”

"Not with Sophie?" Mildred cried in breathless interest.

"Yes, Sophie, thank God. She has sent for me at last."

"I am so glad! I am so very thankful," Mildred declared. "The way that poor creature has insisted upon locking her doors, refusing to see even Miss Mary—but then," and the voice dropped to a pitying cadence, "who could blame her? She *loved* her husband. I think she loved him almost as much as I do mine, and to see him killed before her eyes, and to sit there for hours holding that mangled form—'Lonzo,'" she faltered, springing to her feet, and hurrying until she gained his clasp. "'Lonzo, put little Ossie down and take me—for I'm afraid I'm going to cry.'"

Various suppressed snuffles, and furtive dabs with stealthily abstracted handkerchiefs, attested to the fact that Mildred was not alone in her sympathy.

Mr. Gaither cleared his throat once more.

"God bless my soul!" he exclaimed. "Well, some things are difficult to understand. God certainly moves in a mysterious way. Sophie's husband—my late junior partner—got from this life in time, but only just in time, to save himself from sad entanglements—and—I'm sorry to say it, from a hideous disgrace. The truth is, Trenham died involved in a hundred wild-cat schemes and ventures."

"But didn't the man put over a lot of them?" Thigpen inquired.

"He did indeed, and except that he became the tool of that scoundrel Echstrom—who, as we all know now, was a spy and fully accredited agent of the German Government—Karl might have continued to be a brilliantly successful if adventurous financier. But as it is——" the speaker paused, with a sorrowful shake of his head.

"Echstrom has skipped for Mexico, leaving his dupe to pay all penalties. The tower works credit has, so I find, been used as the basis of many nefarious deals——"

"But you haven't lost, Father dear, not you personally?" the gentle Mildred interrupted. "I couldn't bear it if your name had been dragged into anything dishonourable."

"No, I stand clear," James replied in a voice that thrilled with a hint of what he was next to say. "But I escaped through no wisdom or foresight of my own."

"There is the one who saved me—who saved us all!" and he pointed dramatically at the quivering Miss Ossie, who, on the shining surface of her oaken chair, seemed about to pass into epilepsy.

"Now, Brother James," she stammered, growing a streaky red, "you mustn't. Be silent, James, at once. I—I—only did what seemed to me—my duty."

"Not only me and mine," Gaither hurried for-

ward, while poor Ossie's nervousness grew into virtual despair, "but bedridden old Mrs. Battle; dear Auntie Baring, with her savings of fifty years' labour; brave little Sally Finger and a score of others, have been not only saved from ruin, but made comfortable for life through the genius of that great woman there! Had I my way," crowed James, rising to heights of oratory, "this town would have a statue raised to its finest citizen, and on the pedestal what name should appear but hers—Miss Ossie Laird, whom I am proud to call friend and sister!"

"Oh, James!" the victim moaned, "oh, all you dear kind you-uns. I—I thank you every one—stop that fool grinning in your corner, Bud, else I'll step over there and ruin ye!"

"Three cheers for our Aunt Ossie!" 'Lonzo called out, pride and affection in the look turned upon Miss Laird's martyred visage.

"And what about Miss Mary?" Chris demanded eagerly.

"I thought you had heard, Chris," said Gaither sadly. "Mary and poor Sophie are completely bankrupt. The very stones in that just-started house on the Hallonquist Hall foundations will probably be dug up by their creditors. Nothing can touch Mary's cottage, thank the Lord, but as for money," he spread both hands eloquently—"there is none."

"*Damn him,*" boomed Chris, "for the low-lived

thief he is," and 'Lonzo echoed the growl with smothered profanity.

James drew himself erect with a gesture full of dignity.

"Let him and all his errors lie in eternal peace. He who dies, pays all debts."

CHAPTER XXXVII

THE BACHELOR IN THE NET

"O H, Sophie—Sophie, my dearest!" Letty cried from the threshold of her friend's chamber door. Gladness and tears were gleaming in her voice like tangled silver wires.

She sped across the stagnant, shadowed room to the *chaise longue*, on which she had discerned the outlines of an ink-black, slender shape.

Her thrilled and thrilling tones gained no response. Letty needed to stare hard upon the silent figure, in order to counteract the strange impression that the place was empty but for her living self.

Sophie lay on her back. The pillows, crowded downward underneath her shoulders, threw the white throat into a swan-like arch, while her head, with its unkempt hair, hung a trifle backwards.

Over her upraised face she had laid a bent, bared arm which, thus emerging from the black wrapper, looked pathetically fragile.

"My poor dear—my darling!" Letitia exclaimed anew, and, flinging her hat aside to the dim-lit floor, gathered her friend to a loving, aching heart.

"If only I could help you—oh, my dear!" A

short pause followed, then Letty said hastily, and very much aloud, "I can too and—*will!*"

Sophie took down the shielding arm and put her hand on the visitor's shoulder. Her wan face showed a hint of amazement at her friend's intensity.

"I rather thought you'd be a little sorry. You never spoke ill of Karl. What are they saying of him, Letty?" she suddenly demanded, sitting bolt upright.

The answering grey eyes were calm. "They said—the whole town is saying—that with his loss, there went the most brilliant young business man Dunrobin had ever known."

"I supposed that," Sophie twitched. "But about—Echstrom—about those Government schemes?"

"They say, of course, that falling in with that German swindler and spy was a bad thing for Karl."

"Don't they blame him, though? Don't they cry traitor of my dear love? Don't old Miss Ossie chuckle triumphantly?"

"Sophie, be calm, my darling. Lie there quite still, and I will tell you what Father has just said of him. We'd all been talking about the business,—for through Aunt Ossie's foresight the shot tower credit has been saved—when Daddy said to us solemnly——"

"Well—well, don't dawdle. Can't you see I'm waiting?"

"He who dies, pays all debts," and Letty's voice was like the springtime.

"Ah," Sophie murmured, and fell back to the couch, screening her face anew.

Letitia sprang to her feet. "Wait just a moment," she whispered between the sobs. "I want to run downstairs for a minute; please don't let anybody take my place."

After twenty minutes the visitor returned, carrying a charming tray with a service for two, some sandwiches, and, at one end of the embroidered cloth, a bunch of mingled violets and lilies-of-the-valley.

After tea, the widow set grave dark eyes upon her visitor, and demanded abruptly, "When are you going to start? You know—over there?"

"In less than two weeks now. Why do you ask in that dramatic manner?"

"Because," said Sophie clearly—"because I am going too."

A white light flashed across Letitia Gaither's face.

"Nurses must have some training, dear," she deprecated. "And it takes months to get it, even in the hurried curriculum of these dreadful days."

"I don't expect to nurse," the other cried. "I'm ready to be a slave, a charwoman. I must get away. I'm willing to do anything!"

"Even to scrubbing floors?" Letty's grey eyes,

for all their lambent tenderness, were growing rather keen.

"What better scrub-brush could one have than a broken heart? Why, I could scrape up grease spots with it. Can't you help me to get across?"

"Well, as it happens," Letty replied demurely, "within this past week I have started up a pretty hot line of argument directed to our headquarters in New York City, saying that I must—simply must—have a good reliable assistant when I sail."

"Letty, you thought of me, you blessed angel, even before I spoke!"

"Never mind kissing me, or throttling the life out with those white arms. What you must do at once—remember I'm boss—is to fling on a coat, and come with me out to the fresh air; I can't take a sick assistant to France. Let's go to the woods, where we can talk the whole thing over without danger of meeting a single soul."

Again Sophie demurred, and again Letitia was triumphant.

Before poor Sophie knew it, she was keeping step, and in the way of childhood's strolling, her arms about her comrade's waist.

Talk and discussion had scarcely paused for the space of a single breath, and Sophie was reiterating in a discouraged voice, "If only there was somebody to live in the cottage with Mother and Blessing!" when, at a sudden deflection of the winding

road they saw, a hundred yards ahead, the large stooped figure of a solitary man.

His head was canted forward, and his hands, clasped behind him, made a huge, pink knob in the middle of his back.

His slow progress, and the contemplative pose, alike betokened meditation.

Letty covertly nudged her companion, then, with a mischievous gleam in her pleasant eyes, remarked, in the same hushed manner, "But of course, Sophie, he—Uncle Chris and no other—is the answer to your problem as to who should live in the cottage."

The solemn, manly pace kept to the middle of the thoroughfare, displaying even at a distance, and viewed from the unkind vantage of the rear, a dogged pertinacity.

Then, all at once, amid the old year's grasses at the roadside, their brown pathos standing knee-deep in the fresh, green tide of spring, a something flew, or twinkled.

As quickly, the safe mid-course was abandoned, and, down on his knees, on the red and spongy loam, went the big naturalist.

The two girls hurried up to view the capture as, many years ago, they had often done. The little adventure deepened the impression of a return to childhood, and swept away some of the shadows of the recent tragedy.

It did not seem humanly possible that Chris

could have heard them coming, their footsteps were so light and the damp earth so muffling, yet, at ten yards away, a frantic hand held furtively aside from view of the object hunted, made gestures commanding them not to advance another inch.

From various baggy pockets, the man drew out, first a crumpled paper bag, next a tissue insect-net, and third, a collapsible microscope. His whole body was poised and quivering. A sudden lunge, a handful of mingled earth and broken grasses, and then, the triumphant cry, "I got him—by jumpin' Jupiter, I lit!"

"Now, can we come?" shrilled Letty, like a child.

"You can," cried her uncle in joyous gaiety. "I've just run down a specimen of the rarest of all bugs—the Theridon lu—Shucks!" he laughed out, "the smaller the critter, the bigger the name."

"Well, it's a big piece of luck to meet you here, Uncle Chris," Letty observed, after the excitement caused by the capture had begun to ebb. "Sophie and I came out to discuss a plan of great importance to her future."

Her quiet words recalled Chris to himself—or rather, to the young widow's presence.

He smiled down with the sweetness of a mother. "It's good to see you out in God's air, my dear. Now what have you two been planning for my little Sophie's future?"

"She wants to go abroad—to France—to do a

lot of hard work as my assistant. You remember, Uncle, that I am going?" Letty said, with a little *moue*.

"Now you is being sassy," Chris averred. "Yes, I'd remembered that, if I'd found a whole race of Theridons climbing a single tree, instead of catching a solitary bachelor here in my net."

The two young women exchanged amused glances.

"There's just one difficulty left in the way of Sophie's going—that of her mother and dear little Blessing—living there by themselves with only those cranky servants. We must make arrangements for them. Can *you* suggest a settlement?"

Chris's lips fell apart, his round eyes grew still rounder. "Blessing—Miss Mary," he got out. A convulsive twitching of his entire broad countenance heralded a flood of eager speech.

"It's the finest idea ever, Sophie, and I'm prouder of my niece Letty than any speech can say. But, all the same—you girls are young and mighty handsome. No—it won't never do to have you a-gallivanting all over France—and it stuck full of soldiers—without Uncle Chris to look after you. Nobody shan't call *me* a shirk. So fix it up, girls. Fix it up. I'll send my bugs and beetles—even my pans of larvæ what's hatching in their mud—to the Smithsonian in Washington. They'll be powerful glad to keep the treasures of a man what's giving life itself to his country."

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"What on earth do you think you're talking about?" Letty's voice, clear, unflinching, and as cold as a bucket full of water, came in his face. "And what could a person like you do over there?" she added.

"I'm plumb dead certain sure I could do something," came forth in a dying wail.

"Yes, there is a splendid something you can do," Letty announced relentlessly. "If you are not too selfish."

"Oh, come now, Letty," Sophie threw in compassionately, "Uncle Kiss couldn't be selfish if he tried."

"Oh, couldn't he? Look at him!"

This speech, or rather the perspicacity that barbed it, struck poor Achilles in his vulnerable point.

Deep down in his inner soul, he recognized the death rattle of his cherished bachelorhood.

Suddenly Chris wheeled about in a passion.

"And did you think—you two sassy young varmint— that ever for a minute I had any other idea than caring for Miss Mary? My Godamidey! just for to dream you'd think I wasn't nearly dead to have her take me! Let's turn around, all three of us. Let's go right straight to Miss Mary, and have it all clinched and done.

"N-n-no," he replied, to Letty's natural question, as to whether it would not be more appro-

priate for an eager lover to make such a quest alone.

"I—I—always is a wee bit scared before Miss Mary. She can see so deep down into your vitals, don't you know. I believe that I'd rather—a little rather—have you girls' backing, so to speak."

All the way to the cottage the big man was as silent as a walking tree, only at times, when he thought the girls were not looking, he would lift the net in which a solitary insect stared up at him with dumb, protuberant eyes.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

THE ACORN IN ITS CUP

THE result, as might have been foreseen, of this amatory expedition was that the two girls did most of the courting for the tongue-tied Chris.

At length a sort of partial consent was wrung from Mary, though not until after a full hour of pleading, during which the alleged extremes of temperature supposedly endured by a Damascus blade in process of being tempered were, when compared to the agonies, the fluctuant hopes and fears of the shivering lover, as so many spring-time zephyrs, blowing, now warm, now cool.

"Yes, yes, I reckon so. At least I will promise to think over it!" cried Mrs. Hallonquist in virtual desperation after an hour of argument. "I will agree to anything if only all of you will *go*!"

Next day Chris appeared at the Hallonquist cottage as usual, and at the usual hour, which was about a quarter after five.

Mary ran out to her front porch as she heard him coming. The visitor achieved a gallant and fairly responsive smile, but in his soul he felt the welcome as something premature.

"Good-evening, dear old Chris," she greeted

him, without even offering her hand. "Come right on into my little dining-room. I lighted the fire as I saw you start up the walk."

She hurried in, and at the doorsill threw him a glance that hinted of girlish fun. "All of last night," she began to speak with a certain breathlessness, and with such deep intensity that she forgot to ask him to take a seat, "I've thought and thought what silly old geese we were, Chris, letting those girls embarrass us yesterday. I grow indignant when I think of their trying to force us into this marriage, and I,—for one—*rebel*. I do not intend submitting." The fair head tossed in speaking, like a modest flower assailed by a sudden wind.

Chris stared. "You—you ain't not—in a manner—not by any chance backing out on the trail?" he stammered.

"Yes, in a manner, that's what I've already done."

Chris stared the harder. His face, of comely red, slowly became the tint of an unripe melon. "May I sit down, Miss Mary?" he begged.

"Why, of course!" the other cried, in hospitable compunction. "How thoughtless—how very rude I've been! You sit there and I will draw my little rocker up near to the fire."

Chris crossed the room to the old leather chair and after a few adjusting squeaks and boundings of the well-worn springs in it, the occupant huddled,

drew himself together like a hibernating bear.

The old familiar dining-room had never looked more attractive—more like its real self. In the west window where the lingering day—an overclouded one—held a dull gleam, like pewter, stood a flat dish of daffodils. The fire in the grate was as golden, but its flame-petals far more free.

Impelled by his companion's protracted, stirless quiet, Chris slowly turned about. He found that the gentle eyes were fixed on him, and their light shone through a wavering glaze of tears. On meeting her old friend's look, Mary gave out a cry and a little gesture which spoke denial of her tender mood. "I was just thinking to myself," she said, "that the big brown leather chair seemed strangely a part of you. Even when it is empty—when I sit here by myself—I play that you are in it. The brown sheath fits, Chris,—and you fit it, as an acorn fits its cup."

Chris did not know just why, but at this speech his eyes felt a sudden blurring. He loved to have Miss Mary call him an acorn, but found no words in which to tell her so.

After a second silence he ventured a sheepish glance. This time the fair head, with its silvering temples, was meekly drooped, and as he looked the great wet crystal of a falling tear flashed in the firelight.

"Lord, now she air going to cry on me!" the poor man groaned within.

"Don't cry,—now p-l-e-a-s-e don't you cry now, Miss Mary," he nervously began. "There ain't nothing at all to cry for whatsome-ever, now, Miss Mary, for I've promised the girls as how I would take care of you and Blessing. You air never to be lonesome any more,—not whilst I lives and has my being—I've given my word to it!"

"Stop!" cried the other, springing to her feet. "I do not want your word. Now keep right still and listen to what I tell you, for I think you are going to get a very big surprise." During the next few moments, while the impassioned, unfamiliar voice rang out, the cowering and utterly dumb-founded Chris was to experience what seemed to him the crumbling of his walls of Jericho.

"I have told you already how I have tossed awake all night, thinking and praying, with a heart on fire. It would have been easier to meekly accept the arrangements you and the others made for me. But somehow—last night—the meekness all went from me, and to my great astonishment I find that there is a woman left beneath. It is this woman now that says to you, I *scorn* your pity and protection, nor will I condescend to be merely cared for by you or any man alive."

Here was Chris's freedom—sudden, absolute. "But listen, Miss Mary, let me speak," he now protested in a shaking voice.

"Yes, you shall speak, dear friend," said Mary,

very tall and white as she loomed above him, "but you can make no difference in the stand I take."

She turned as if to leave him, at which, with a single bound, he gained his feet.

"You've taken the whole thing wrong," he panted. "It ain't that I'm pitying and protecting you,—I'm *willing* now to be wed."

"That then must be the parting of our ways," Mary said simply, "for I am *not* willing."

"But wait there—now listen, Miss Mary," he cried with a clutch on a slender ebon sleeve. "My poor head's going around, like a hive when the wood-smoke's starting. Give me a minute for to hook myself back to place. You cain't go off and leave me in this franzy. Think of our years of love."

"Yes, I am thinking of all those years of friendship," that strange, most reasonable of women said, with a quiet smile; "and because of the precious years, I am still going to ask you to serve me."

"What's it?" he breathed, a great relief making his tense face gentler. "Anything in this world that you can ask."

"Then, Chris," she told him, meanwhile gently removing the big shaking hand that clutched her arm, "I am going to beg you to stop—for at least six months—coming here at all."

"Stop coming—*here!*" he echoed, not quite believing. "Stop seeing you and Blessing every day?"

"Yes, Chris. Just that—for otherwise, I don't think I can bear it. 'To care for me'!" she murmured, with the first break in her voice. "It sounds like a public institution."

"But listen, Miss Mary. You must have common-sense. How will you get along without a—helper? Brother James says that Trenham is made you poor."

"How I shall manage to get along need not concern or trouble you, dear Chris. Some way will open for us. Go now, my friend. Go quickly, for I am drained of strength."

She sank down into the small rocker, while Chris, with a great sob, flung himself to his knees.

"Sit ye down there, Miss Mary. Sit ye, dear. You don't really mean as you would drive poor Chris away from this little fireside forever. Say you were joking about my being driven off!"

He stared imploringly up to her small, white face. Her head was thrown back, the frail lids closed on a shining rim of tears and the patient mouth compressed heroically.

"Oh, God," said Chris, as if in reverent awe, as the full meaning of her rejection came to him—"never to see you more for months and months of grieving. Never to sit there in my old armchair, with Blessing in my arms, and you a-smiling like an angel, from this little nook. Never to have a gleam of the best of all things,—loving. Say it ain't true, Miss Mary, say it ain't. Won't you wake

up and tell me that I am asleep and dreaming dreadful horse-dreams,—nightmares, I mean. My Godamidey, Mary,—I just can't stand it—nohow."

Mary's drenched violets that stood her now for eyes opened upon him. "Oh, Chris, my Chris," she faltered, shrinking still farther off, "don't make this last mistake, dear. Don't think a broken habit, or a great wave of pitying tenderness can ever take the place of that deeper and holier thing—of——"

She could not speak the culminating word, but he felt her shiver like a twanged and muted harp.

"Love," he said for her. "That is the word I need. What am I made of, darling, but the long, patient years of loving you? What do I care for insects, or writing, or fame, or anything else beside, if you air taken from me? I see it now for the first time sunrise-clear. There ain't been another woman,—not even another thought, though once—you know," he nodded shyly—"Lizzy Lycosa."

"Chris—Chris," she sobbed in an abandonment of joy. "Yes, it is true,—you need me—oh, Chris—and I need you."

He bent the rough head before her. From out the past there came the vision of a young lad's agony out on a not-far-distant hill. He caught her two hands in his and looked straight into her eyes. "I can't do withouten ye, Mary. I can't do withouten ye, nohow."

CHAPTER XXXIX

A WEDDING JOURNEY

AFTER the expected cable from France announced the safe arrival of Sophie and Letty "over there," Mrs. Hallonquist consented to name her wedding day.

In the same old Rectory wing, with the spring breeze blowing the freshly starched curtains straight out into the flower-scented room, Mary, as slender as she was those many years before, dressed in white muslin, and bearing what might seem the identical wild-flower "bokay," stood on the same worn spot of the same worn carpet, surrounded by a gathering of relatives and friends, and was pronounced the wife of Christopher Laird.

Uncle Grief, never doubting that he was the best-man, stood shoulder to shoulder with the less complacent and more critical Mrs. Grief, and kept his snowy gloves well to the fore, being inordinately proud of them!

Blessing, a vision of diaphanous white skirts, of ruffles and pastel colouring, her golden curls topped by the hugest and most alluring of white bows, turned swelling tears to laughter by the quaint remark, "Isn't my Grandma just too beautiful!

I'm goin' to wait until I am a grandma—ever to get married."

At length it was all over. There was to be no distant wedding trip. The married pair had decided to drive quietly back to their cottage home. For a few days Blessing was to stop with the Thigpen children, under "Aunt Milly's" tender and efficient care.

For the short drive Chris had scorned 'Lonzo's suggestion of an automobile, and, in its place, insisted upon using the aged Uncle Daddy and his station hack.

The bridal pair got in, not without certain handfuls of thrown rice, and one enormous bow, tied by the junior Ossie, to the back of the battered vehicle, and having started, joggled along on the old dirt street in what would have been silence, but for the laboured groans and squeaks of ancient rusty springs.

Chris was abstracted, labouring, as it seemed, with some inward problem which could not be shared. His wife, smiling happily, was content to wait, until the overburdened heart could ease itself. As yet these two,—predestined, and strongly suited, had scarcely dared the touch of lovers' hands.

The old hack jogged along, sagging preposterously on the side where the bridegroom fidgeted.

Nearing the Gaither home his agitation—rather than call it turbulence—increased so noticeably,

that Mary leaned closer, murmuring, "What is the matter, dear?"

Chris turned a hunted face. "I knew you'd help me out,—bless you, Miss Mary. I knew you'd help me out, being the kind and thoughtful lady that you air. I'm sure, now, you won't get mad if I ask you to let me stop for a half a minute here at my own front gate. There is something I've just remembered as I'd forgotten, something that can't be left to bide on there, lonesome and by itself, without running the risk of being completely ruined."

The bride flushed imperceptibly. So this—some larvæ, or some hatching cocoon—had been the cause of all this agitation.

"Of course, Chris, if you wish it. And please don't think that you must speak to me, or—or—ask about the things you want to do. You are your own free master,—and mine too," she whispered tenderly, but Chris did not seem to hear.

"Thankee, Miss Mary. Thankee a whole lot," he cried out fervently. "I couldn't have slept a wink the whole night through had I been forced to leave that important experiment in danger of being chilled."

"What sort of experiment is it? Do you mind telling, dear?"

"N-n-no," answered Chris, peering out through the darkness to see if the Gaither gate was yet in sight. "Not if you care to hear it. There are eggs

—eggs in warm mud—that has to stay near to the bed where you're sleeping,—not to get cooled too much, or the whole thing goes bad. Here we are now,—whoa! Daddy——”

He sprang out through the wheels before they had really stopped, and Mary could hear him chasing along the bricked front walk and up the steep kitchen steps as though a mad bull were pursuing.

Mary sat on in darkness, pierced by the one red eye of a smelling old hack oil lamp. Even the tactful and usually loquacious Uncle Daddy found not a word to say. Mrs. Christopher Laird was thinking, and not without some resentment, what a figure of fun she would appear to the casual passerby—a bride, just married, alone in an ancient hack at ten o'clock at night.

The moments trailed like velvet, slow and soft. Surely he must be coming back to her very, very soon. As time crawled on, Mary began to know queer qualms and visions as to the possibility of this great child-man she loved, following the time-worn furrows of long habit, actually going to rest as usual,—now that his old familiar room was attained,—entirely forgetting her, or the fact that she was married. Chris was quite capable of such a fantastic lapse.

With an inward catch of the breath, and hands pressing to a fluttering, thankful heart, she now heard him lumbering toward her. She could barely make out his dim form through the night. He

seemed to be carrying something; and staggered from side to side, as under a careful weight. When at the side of the carriage, she leaned over and saw that the object was the largest, rustiest dishpan ever known.

"Oh, Chris! Your *wed-ding* gloves!" she cried impulsively, and then bit her lips in annoyance that she had been betrayed into the motherly admonition.

Chris looked up to her face with a disarming smile. "I declare to Goodness—but I plumb forgot I was wearing wedding gloves. I'm sorry. I'll buy you a new pair for me the first thing to-morrow morning. Here is the mud I spoke of. The eggs are hid within." He beamed down on the surface of the semiputrid mud adoringly.

For about ten seconds the new-made wife had a sharp decisive struggle, from which she soon emerged with the smile of love and understanding which was a banner raised to the ramparts of certain lifelong happiness for both.

"Put them in here, my darling," she said tenderly, moving her feet aside to make room for the horror. "I'm going to help you hatch them without fail. Are they so very rare?"

"The rarest there is," said Chris. "They come from Southern Europe. A big man there, Professor Frenchy something, sent them to me to see if we could start the species here. They'll fight some

insect pests already thriving, what the farmers could do without."

"Oh, Chris, that's simply *won-der-ful!*" a voice of silver cried. "I'll be so proud to help you bring them out. It will be my triumph too, won't it, dearest?"

Chris turned to her slowly. "Ye-s-s!" he slowly said.

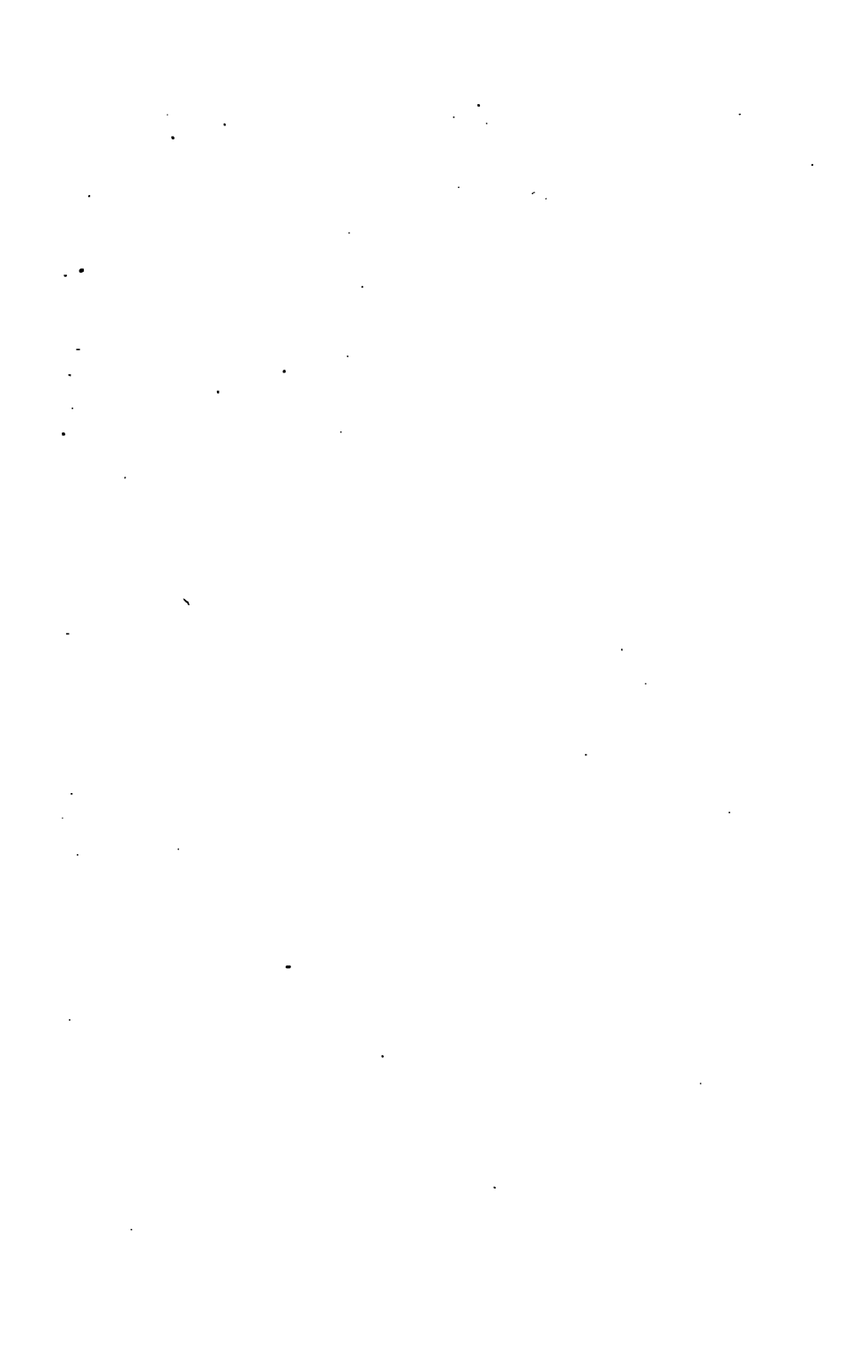
Her sweet face was toward him, lifted a little like an eager child's. The wonder is that the love upon it did not gleam out in a sort of spiritual phosphorescence.

The dark cloak had fallen backward from a throat like milk, showing her wedding whiteness. The scent of roses and fragile, mangled ferns rose from her crushed bouquet.

Chris gave a sort of sob as he caught the slight form to him. "Shucks—Lord!" she heard his dear lips say, "what do I care for bug-eggs or professors,—or whether the farmers grow a single row of corn,—when I got you, at last,—for my wedded wife,—when I is got Miss Mary for my own."

And—though it sounds incredible—for a long, long quivering moment after this the patent leathern pump on Chris's right foot went deep into the dishpan and its hatchery.

THE END



**This book is under no circumstances to be
taken from the Building**

[illegible]

